

ABSTRACT

GROWING IN CHRIST TOGETHER: FACILITATING SPIRITUAL MATURITY THROUGH MARITAL ENHANCEMENT

by

Ronnie Neal Burton

This project sought to ascertain whether marital relationships are a facilitating factor in discipleship that leads toward spiritual growth by investigating in what ways improved marital relationships affected the spiritual growth process of married couples. An exploratory qualitative study, the basic research tool consisted of semi-structured interviews with couples who had experienced positive change in their marital relationships. It hypothesized that enhancing marital relationships helps build caring family relational systems upon which the church can grow a more mature community of believers. This perspective perceives sexuality as a core aspect of the relational image of God in human identity, recognizes family relationships as essential to Pauline discipleship processes, and uses relational spirituality to understand spiritual maturity. The study suggests four findings of potential major significance:

1. Moral affective capacity development could be used to describe or measure types and degrees of positive marital change.
2. Promoting positive marital change benefits greatly from helping resources that address marital issues from a holistic approach, including commitment to permanent self-giving, identity in Christ, mindfulness, and mutual respect.
3. Positive changes in the marital relationship enhance transformational spiritual growth.

4. Positive change in marital dynamics is only one of several factors that influence the expression of care beyond primary relationships.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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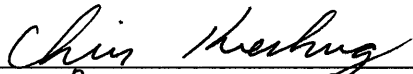
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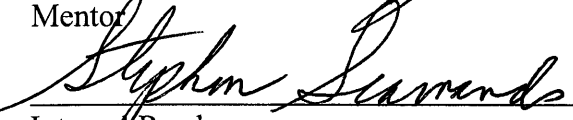
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ix
CHAPTER 1 PROBLEM	1
Introduction	1
Purpose	5
Research Questions	5
Research Question #1	5
Research Question #2	6
Research Question #3	6
Research Question #4	6
Definition of Terms	6
Description of Project	7
Context	7
Methodology	8
Participants	8
Instrumentation	9
Data Collection	9
Data Analysis	10
Generalizability	10
Theological Foundation	11

Overview.....	12
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE.....	14
Theological Reflections on Renewal in the Image of God	14
God’s Image Created	15
God’s Image Distorted.....	31
God’s Image Restored.....	34
Conclusion of Theological Reflections.....	48
Research Literature	49
The Need for Enhanced Discipleship.....	50
A Bidirectional Process of Discipleship	54
Spiritual Formation of the Individual.....	59
Spiritual Formation of the Community.....	72
Dynamics of Marital Relationships	76
Spirituality’s Influence on Marriage.....	82
Marriage’s Influence on Spiritual Transformation	86
Research Design.....	88
Summary	88
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY	90
Problem and Purpose	90
Hypothesis.....	91
Research Questions.....	91
Research Question #1	91
Research Question #2	92

Research Question #3	92
Research Question #4	93
Population and Participants.....	94
Design of the Study.....	94
Instrumentation	96
Reliability and Validity.....	96
Data Collection	96
Data Analysis	97
Ethical Procedures	98
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS.....	99
Problem and Purpose	99
Participants.....	100
Research Question #1	100
Research Question #2	108
Research Question #3	111
Research Question #4	115
Summary of Major Findings.....	121
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION.....	122
Major Findings.....	122
Developing Caring Capacity in Marriage	122
Benefits of Holistic Marital Intervention.....	123
Marital Enhancement and Spirituality	125
Multiple Factors Influence Extension of Care	125

Implications of the Findings	128
Limitations of the Study.....	129
Unexpected Observations	130
Recommendations.....	132
Postscript.....	134
APPENDIXES	
A. Interview Questions	136
B. Confidentiality Statement.....	140
C. Flier Handed Out at Small Group Presentations	142
WORKS CITED	143

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 2.1. Comparison of Gibson and REVEAL Moral Authority Development.....	61
Table 4.1. Categories of Couples.....	103

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 2.1. Moral Affective Capacities Related to Moral Motives	70
Figure 4.1. Flow of Influence on MAC Development.....	112

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM

Introduction

As he walked through the parking lot at the church campus, he appeared flustered and highly emotional. I began to introduce myself, but he looked me directly in the eye and said, “I was driving to the lawyer’s office to divorce my wife. I saw the sign to your church and saw there were people here. I don’t know why I stopped, but I’ll give you one chance to stop me from divorcing her.” In response, I offered the opportunity for him to bring his wife to a weekly divorce intervention group for four weeks before deciding whether to file for divorce. Surprisingly, he and his wife showed up at 9:00 a.m. Sunday morning. Over the next month, they learned several marital relationship skills, reported arguing less than half as often as before, and decided they would stay together for another month. After attending all the marital skills classes for three complete, consecutive cycles, their marriage had not reached ideal; it had become a comfortable relationship with two fairly happy participants. Within six months, both of them became devoted volunteers in the elementary grades ministry. They began rapidly growing in their devotion to each other and accepted Jesus as Lord of their lives.

The couple described in this story did not seek to become Christians and then decide their marriage should change. In the process of seeking to improve their marriage, both spouses discovered authentic relationships with God. This success story represents a major goal of pastoral ministry—to care for people with a life need and hope that in the process their hearts open to a deeper relationship with God. On further reflection, one

might wonder why a pastor would expect individuals to become followers of Christ, or better followers of Christ, just because they found help for their marriage.

The answer to the question belies more significant theological concepts than most people recognize. Two major streams of biblical thought combine to indicate that marital relationships play a significant role in discipleship processes. The first and most obvious scriptural considerations come from New Testament teachings about the relationships of husbands and wives. The passage in Ephesians 5:21-33 exhorts mutual submission in marriage. Peter describes that wives sometimes have such influence that their lifestyle wins over an unbelieving husband, followed by a passage denoting the power of a husband's inappropriate behavior to negate his prayers (1 Pet. 3:1-7). In Colossians 3:18-19, the roles of husband and wife relate to maintaining a fellowship of peace and unity. Peter and Paul, by such consistent mention, demonstrated their belief in the importance of marital relationships. The second stream of thought, found initially in the Genesis creation narratives, relates human sexuality to the very identity of humankind created as male and female image bearers of God. The New Testament teachings of transformational discipleship into the image of Christ directly correspond to healing the image of God deep within human identity.

The issue of fostering transformational discipleship looms large before Christian leadership. The challenge of sorting through the myriad of influences in the lives of people to determine which of them effectively lead to godly transformation is both daunting and open to error. As the minister of pastoral care for several years at a church with thousands in weekly attendance, opportunities presented themselves in which I observed the incremental maturation of many believers over a period of time. As I

interacted with individuals and couples in counseling, teaching, and other caring, the maze of influences on daily life awed me. I developed the theory that immediately after people make a commitment to believe in Jesus the public proclamation of the gospel and mass teaching methods most commonly employed by churches are very significant. Soon, however, other influences begin to take on greater meaning. The theory was conjecture. I had no means by which I could truly analyze or evaluate the influence any one set of programs made in transforming lives. Many churches offer marriage enrichment programs, yet no significant research exists to indicate that improving marriages makes disciples.

The REVEAL research study, recently conducted by the Willow Creek Association, concluded that even though great efforts have been expended to make more and better disciples in the United States for several decades, the efforts have not been as fruitful as anticipated (Hawkins and Parkinson 36). Greg Hawkins, executive pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, said the survey project began in response to a conversation he had with their communications director, Cally Parkinson. She suggested asking a consumer-research expert to help them with strategic planning. The expert, Eric Arnson, “was talking about coming at this from a whole different point of view. Eric said he could help us if we wanted to measure the effectiveness of our church—what really is helping people grow” (Hawkins). In essence, Willow Creek, perhaps the nation’s largest Christian church and organization, definitely one of the most influential, admitted that before this new survey tool they had no idea how ineffective they had been in their goal to make disciples. Churches all over America have begun to use the survey. Consistently, the results are very similar. The efforts of churches to disciple people in their

congregation have not been very effective (Hawkins and Parkinson 147). The REVEAL campaign from Willow Creek has touched a critical point. Christian leaders need to reconsider how they evaluate the effectiveness of their churches. Future generations of Americans will be lost to the kingdom of God if American church leadership cannot identify the reasons for transformational complacency and implement changes that bring greater maturity to individuals and congregations.

New formats such as the seeker sensitive approach, which is represented by Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, have not changed the tide. Emergent conversations, an effort by several leading pastors that have analyzed the effects of post-modern thought on American Christianity for more than a decade, have spawned a new style of eclectic worship without making profound inroads of evangelism among American young adults. Something deeper than style or format is wrong. I am personally in agreement with and excited by the paradigm changes suggested by several missional thinkers regarding the development of congregations as task-oriented communities with the anthropological characteristics of *communitas* that expect members to grow toward Christian maturation (Frost; Guder; Hirsch). Cultural barriers of rugged individualism and the American dream of wealthy independence that have greatly influenced theology within American Christianity challenge the implementation of those missional ideas. Technological developments and international political awareness have created unprecedented societal flux, but these two cultural mores appear impenetrable. They steadfastly devour almost every attempt to foster congregational expressions of identifying with Christ in community and enduring suffering with gratitude.

New discipleship approaches must be developed. They must be strategically founded upon a biblical understanding of how transformation of lives occurs through local church ministries. I propose that nuclear families should be among the primary focuses of those efforts. The wars between spirituality and ungodliness in culture express their influence most directly within the life of family systems (McGoldrick, Gerson, and Petry 14; Zeitlin, Megawangi, Kramer, Colletta, Babatunde, and Garman). The church depends upon those very same family systems to model, facilitate, and mediate transformation in the image of Christ. The reflections in Chapter 2 conclude that, as the foundational relationship within most family systems, improving the Trinitarian image of God that radiates from marriage ranks among the primary battlegrounds for building up, or destroying, the maturation processes of the church. This project was built upon the premise that understanding and capturing the ways and means by which changes in marital relationships impact spirituality is a key to influencing individuals, families, and congregations toward growth in maturity and missional potential.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to discern how positive marital relationship change impacts the spiritual growth of married couples at West Ridge Church of Dallas, Georgia.

Research Questions

The following four questions were formulated to help focus this study.

Research Question #1

What positive marital changes were reported by the participating couples?

Research Question #2

What spiritual growth was reported by the participating couples as having occurred after positive marital change?

Research Question #3

What growth in moral affective capacity was reported by the participating couples as having occurred after positive marital changes?

Research Question #4

How are spiritual growth and moral affective capacity affected by positive marital change?

Definition of Terms

In this study, several terms require definition.

Moral affective capacities relate to the ability to do what is right concerning other people. They combine the knowledge of *what* a person should do with the *know how* to do it and the *motivation* to do it that actually results in demonstrable *doing* of the right moral action.

The *marital relationship* comprises the dynamic interactions that characterize the partnership of a couple participating in marriage.

A *marriage covenant* consists of permanent commitments from a man to one woman and from that same woman back to the man recognized legally and socially as establishing a marriage.

Marriage is a fierce, soul-level determination to maintain a tender heart towards one's beloved partner in the marriage covenant through all the phases of life, coming as

close as possible to helping him or her find fulfillment as beloved and encouraging him or her to grow in maturity.

Spiritual growth of an individual relates movement toward a clearer reflection of the image of God as revealed through both expression of motivational attitudes and behavioral patterns that occur in daily life. Though I recognize human capacities and functions as relevant to the image of God in people, the quality and tenor with which they are expressed in relationships with God, with other people, and with self compose the primary means to evaluate the clarity of God's image in this project (Seamands, Personal note 3).

Description of Project

Over the past two years, West Ridge Church presented several opportunities to attend marriage enrichment seminars and, each year, the church devotes a series of sermons to marriage issues. No information exists to evaluate in what ways those seminars and sermons may have affected the lives of the congregation. This project does not attempt directly to assess the effectiveness of those seminars and sermons on the discipleship of couples within the congregation. It enters within the evaluation void to discern by what means a random set of couples experienced relational improvements and also looks at the overall influence of those relational improvements on their daily lives in order to inform subsequent marital enhancement interventions.

Context

The northwest suburbs of the Atlanta, Georgia, metropolitan area have a diverse population, ranging from near urban to near rural and from poverty levels to high income, highly educated socioeconomic neighborhoods. West Ridge Church in Dallas, Georgia, a

congregation that averages over four-thousand in weekly attendance on the growing edge of the suburban area, attracts mostly evangelical Christians in their thirties and forties who desire a contemporary worship style and informal teaching. Attendees are mostly Caucasian, exhibiting less ethnic diversity than the surrounding area and slightly less socioeconomic diversity, ranging from low middle income to high middle-income families. The church has exhibited rapid growth for several years. The church has attached a discipleship process to membership, but membership is not a primary focus of large group meetings. Though it has successfully attracted a larger than usual percentage of people to attend small groups in homes, a significant number of attendees only experience loose relational associations with other attendees. Teaching during the main worship services challenges people to maintain quality marital relationships without giving legalistic descriptions of how the relationship should be worked out. Male domination and authoritarian marriages are not promoted.

Methodology

This project was an exploratory qualitative study. The basic research tool consisted of semi-structured interviews with couples who had recently experienced positive change in their marital relationships. The questions used in interviews investigated the effects of positive marital enhancement upon the spirituality of couples involved.

Participants

Participants in the research project were married evangelical Christian couples who attended West Ridge Church in Dallas, Georgia. Each couple had experienced some form of marital relationship improvement prior to the research project. Nineteen couples

that met the research parameters chose to participate. One additional couple that attended a similar church in a nearby community was referred to the interviewer and chose to participate.

Instrumentation

The interview questions found in Appendix A formed the basis of semi-structured interviews that investigated the types of changes that had occurred in the couples' marital relationships, causes to which the couples attributed those changes, how the couples' relationships with God had changed, how their participation in church programs had changed, whether any changes had occurred in their efforts to help other people experience God's loving grace, and the reasons to which they attributed any and all of these changes. Chapter 2 of this study describes several characteristics of healthy marital relationships that reflect images of the triune God. The interview format was built around the anticipation that those characteristics would help organize the results and were, as such, built into the themes of the interview process. All interview questions were open-ended so that the answers given by participants would not be biased toward those themes.

Data Collection

I presented the opportunity to participate in the research project to several home groups and contacted several participants of classes by e-mail or phone. I instructed interested couples to contact me personally by phone or e-mail in order to maintain confidentiality. When couples contacted me, I confirmed that they understood the interview procedures and scheduled interviews with those couples who were still interested. Semi-structured interviews took an average of approximately sixty-five

minutes per couple. I recorded the interviews and later transcribed and stored them in a digital, written format.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data transcripts occurred through incremental phases (Creswell 257-59). Progressive phases of data analysis categorized the couples, observed thematic occurrences in couple narratives, and reviewed the data within developing thematic structures.

Generalizability

The theological foundations of personal transformation in Christ as the image bearers of God and psychological constructs of human development theory along with relational spirituality upon which the project was based are considered universal, but the selection process primarily limited research participants to attendees of West Ridge Church in Dallas, Georgia. The tone of teaching at West Ridge Church puts great value upon devotion to God and experiencing personal transformation. Without further confirmation in other venues, the results of this study are suspect in legalistic and authoritarian contexts and Christian contexts that do not place high value on transformational discipleship. Any suggested conclusions require further evaluation for confirmation of wider reaching generalizability. However limited, it adds information to the existing void in research regarding the effect of marital relationship quality upon spirituality. The simplicity of this study also suggests that local churches have the potential qualitatively to evaluate the affective influence of specific programs upon the transformational experiences of participants. This study overtly acknowledges such

transformational experiences to be dependent upon empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Result validity is, therefore, limited specifically to the efforts of Christian believers.

Theological Foundation

The Bible introduces humankind as image-bearers of the reflection of God. Many have conjectured upon the focal point of that image, but most recent theologians conclude the very nature of human identity corresponds to that *imago Dei*. The fall of humanity into sin marred the image such that, though people remain image-bearers, the very nature of human existence is bound in sin. According to Romans 8:29, Jesus came to restore God's image in humanity. Ephesians 4:22-24 describes the teachings of the Apostles regarding the Christian goal of change from sinfulness to righteousness:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted in its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (NIV)

Christian renewal and transformation consists primarily, through the power of the Holy Spirit, of accepting a newly restored identity and walking in daily growth toward the image of God modeled by Jesus (Hoekema 27-31). Transformative Christian discipleship requires both providing opportunity for personal encounter with the saving grace of God and encouragement of submission to ongoing renewal via relationship with God and his word.

Individuals in isolation cannot adequately portray the image of God. Community is essential to God's image. The creation narrative announces a plurality in the counsel of God making man "in our image" (Gen. 1:26) and a plurality in humanity as "male and female" (Gen. 1:27). The more detailed narrative of human creation found in Genesis chapter two focuses on the essential nature of humans as fundamentally existing through

pairs of individuals interacting within interdependent relationships. Though the focus of the narrative is not marriage, the immediate and spontaneous movement of the original couple into a marital relationship closely associates sexuality expressed through marriage as the foundational relationship upon which human society must build.

The narrative associates the original marriage with more than creation. In and through that original marital relationship, male and female humans experienced temptation and, together, became distorted by sin. As described in the redemptive curse declared by God, the expression of human sexuality within the marital relationship became marred as the first expression of the distortion of God's image (Gen. 3:16-19). The biblical association progresses from distortion to restoration. The restoration of proper marital relationships discussed in Ephesians 5:21-33, 1 Peter 3:1-7, and Colossians 3:18-4:1 all relate closely to the identity of the church as the renewed people of God (Eph. 5:1; 1 Pet. 2:9-12; Col. 3:9-10). First Timothy chapter three discusses not only the importance of the character of overseers and deacons, but implies the importance of trustworthy family units to the stability and continued maturation of the congregation. The New Testament presents mature husbands and wives growing together in marital relationships as a foundational entity through which God exhibits grace to the couple, their children, the church, and the surrounding society. The church cannot prudently ignore the development of mature marital relationships as an essential element of Christian discipleship.

Overview

Chapter 2 reviews theological concepts of the relational identity of humans as created in the Trinitarian image of God with applicability to discipleship efforts toward

transformation to identity in Christ. It also establishes the context of this study within a review of research literature pertaining to spiritual formation, attributes of marital relationships, and the relationships between marriage and spirituality.

Chapter 3 presents a detailed explanation of the project's design, the research methods, and the methods of data analysis.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study.

Chapter 5 reports the major findings of the study and the practical applications that flow out of the research. It also offers suggestions for further inquiry and study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE

Theological Reflections on Renewal in the Image of God

Most Americans evaluate relationships with a concept too narrow for biblical standards. Hazel R. Markus and Shinobu Kitayama suggest that the Western mind perceives “self as an entity ... detached from context” whereas more “interdependent” cultures view “self-in-relation-to-other” (255). Getting to know a student from mainland China was an eye-opening experience that caused me to question my perspective of marriage and family. Over time, as we became friends, American individualism and Chinese community awareness struck a dissonance too strong to ignore. Several families of Chinese students regularly chose to share apartments with other families. The semi-private living spaces they created made me uncomfortably aware of the intensity with which Americans clutch individualism. My personal hopes of wealthy independence defined by the American dream of a home with at least two cars and a bedroom for each member of the family somehow seemed threatened by a lifestyle that did not hold individualism in such high esteem. Community commands the attention of the American brain only in the context of how the community impacts the quality of life of the individuals living there. Within the traditional perspective of American rugged individualism, “relationships appear optional” (Seamands, *Ministry* 33). Personhood, in America, takes the form of self-actualization, self-determination, and self-reliance. Society’s evaluation of a person usually depends upon the individual’s productivity, talent, and personal wealth without regard to the quality of relationships the person might

have established. A biblical perspective of personhood generates from a vastly different point of origin, the image of God.

Genesis 1:26 declares the created identity of humanity: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.’” In order to understand the core of human identity, the image in which humankind was created commands central focus. The following theological review discusses the image of God reflected in human identity as skillful, interdependent relationships, especially in marriage. It discusses the distortion of God’s image and the transmission of that distortion through families. The review then investigates God’s efforts to heal and reconcile his image in people through the church and recommends restoring God’s image in marriages as a strategic discipleship initiative.

God’s Image Created

People have debated the way humans reflect God throughout church history. Theologians usually tried to find a characteristic that clearly separates humans from animals. None of the interpretations satisfied everyone. As a result, they progressively broadened and improved their ideas. Categorically, proposals fit into classifications of structural, functional, relational or inclusive (Seamands, Personal note 2; Ware 15-16; Storms; Hoekema 68-73).

The majority of theologians throughout history perceived the image of God in humanity as a structural or substantive capacity that humans alone possess in all of creation (Seamands, Personal note 2). In the second century, Irenaeus proposed that the ability to reason and make moral decisions distinguished humans from the rest of nature. By the fifth century, Augustine expanded those ideas to include memory and intellectual capacity. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas adopted reason, intellect, and

volition but focused all of them into one definitive capacity to know and love God (Seamands, Personal note 2; Storms; Ware 15). Reformation theologians such as Luther and Calvin relied more heavily on balancing Scripture. They believed that the image of God incarnated through Jesus as related in the New Testament is more profound than simply a distinction from animals. They began to blur the lines between capacity and function with more abstract concepts such as righteousness and holiness. In their persistence to find structural capacities, however, they divided human existence into body and soul (Seamands, Personal note 2; Ware 15). As Anthony A. Hoekema observes, the list of structural characteristics through which people portray the image of God could entail an almost endless list (e.g. responsibility, aesthetics, creativity, ingenuity, speech), constantly blurring the lines between structural and functional concepts (e.g., creativity versus creating), without ever providing an adequate representation (70-73).

Theologians who recognized the inadequacy of purely structural thought began to transition toward the actions implied within reformation abstractions. They proposed a functional presentation of God's image residing in humanity that focuses on actions or tasks, the things people do (Hoekema 69; Seamands, Personal note 2; Storms). The most common emphasis placed on such functions related the dual proximity of humans as being God's image bearers and as rulers of the earth in Genesis 1:26 and 1:27-28. Along with the scriptural emphasis, archeological discoveries began to influence their thinking. Scientists determined that ancient kings would declare themselves divine and then place statues of themselves or depictions of their character in outlying areas of their kingdoms as images to declare their authority to rule when they were not actually present. The king often appointed vice-regents to govern the province as authoritative representatives

(Klassen; Herzfeld 21-22). Gerhard von Rad and D. J. A. Clines developed the idea that more than mere representations of God, people function as the stewards of creation (von Rad 60; Clines 101); God created humanity as his vice-regents and dominion representatives to the nonhuman world (Herzfeld 21; Seamands, Personal note 2; Storms; Ware 17). During the 1900s, theologians such as Bruce A. Ware and Ryan Klassen continued to broaden the functional tone (Klassen; Ware 17). Klassen states that as vice-regents people “must be totally dependent on him (God) for guidance and direction.” Ware, in his description of functional holism, states that God’s image in people includes structure, function, and relationship, but “priority is given to the God-ordained functioning of humans” (17). Even the broadened functional approach did not suit many theologians.

The relational version of theological anthropology came to being in the 1900s, progressed, and broadened, similar to the functional view. The relational view of humanity sees the image of God not as some aspect such as a capacity or a function (Ware 15) but considers it to consist of the four major relationships within which people are involved; with God, with others, with the natural world, and with self (Seamands, Personal note 2). Karl Barth considers the importance of human creation as male and female to indicate that the image of God lies in the I-Thou confrontation of human existence in relationship with God, the call to love God as God loves them (Herzfeld 26; Hoekema 49-53). Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the essential difference between human and nonhuman as freedom, freedom to be for one another and freedom to rule nature. Both of these freedoms reflect God, who is free in all ways, but has bound himself in relation to all creation as creator (60-67). The theology of a relational image of God

contributes to the ontology of humanity the essential social nature of humans as a reflection of the Trinitarian nature of God, but it does not persuade all theologians to recant the many facets presented by structural and functional perspectives.

Throughout the last century, Christian speculations about the image of God, more and more often, merge the historical streams of thought to create an inclusive picture. Every facet of human existence—structural, functional, and relational—laid valid claims as an aspect of how people reflect the nature of God. “To be human and to be the image of God are not separable; the essence of human nature is being the image of God” (Klassen). When one human turns to look the other human in the face, that person sees not only their neighbor, but to some degree a picture of the face of God.

Loving your neighbor as yourself is like loving God (Ernst 52-53). The root of the Great Commandment can be traced to the creation of people in the image of God, both individualistically and corporately. Married couples relate to other couples and to God together. Congregations relate to individuals, other congregations, the outside world, and God. “This implies that we can only see the full riches of the image of God as we take into account all of human history and all of man’s diverse cultural contributions” (Hoekema 100). A truly inclusive model considers every facet of human existence, structural, functional, and relational, at every level of human relational systems, from individual to national culture, in all four modes of relationships, to God, others, the natural world, and self, to portray an aspect of God’s infinitely awesome image.

This project considers a holistic and inclusive model of God’s image most appropriate for the sake of evaluating growth toward mature Christianity. In order to function as a measure of discipleship, however, the image of God in humanity should use

descriptions most parishioners can observe as relevant and should flow out of ideas and vocabulary similar to the biblical teachings with which they are familiar. Some of the attempts by contemporary theologians to create more inclusive models encompass as many of the traditional views as possible by creating a reversed adaptation of the inclusive model. Rather than asking what it is in humans that reflects God, it surveys biblical descriptions of God in whose image people are created (Hoekema 73). Trinitarian theological contemplations present a reasonable format. The following review attempts to merge these ideas into a description of God's image in humanity relevant to discipleship in the local congregation. An analysis of the narrative in Genesis chapter two about creation of the original couple roughly estimates the structural natures of men and women. To see an image of God through a roughly functional lens, one observes the growth of wisdom along with development of the discernment and skill with which people decide and act. A theology of Trinitarian relationships presented in the Gospel of John denotes God's social nature and provides profound insight to a holistic reflection of God found through the development of excellent relationships within the permanent interdependence of marital relationships.

Image seen as sexuality. The first and most significant indication of God's character in the Bible is the overarching *scope of goodness in creation*. The concept distinctly marks the first chapter of Genesis. Each stage of the creation narrative consummates with God's evaluative declaration that what has been created is good. Nothing is acceptable until God declares that it is good. At the end of the first chapter of Genesis, all is good: The sun, moon, stars, and earth are all good; the plants, animals, and

people are all good. This use of repetition as a literary device introduces good as God's highest priority, an essential requirement of God's character.

Within the broad tapestry of creation painted in the first chapter of Genesis, God created people on the sixth day with bodies not unlike all the other animals created that day. The second chapter of Genesis appears to be a literary complement to the first chapter that expands the creation narrative phrase of humans as *male and female*. By the end of the chapter, the first human couple stands together in ideal romance, naked and unashamed. Along the way, however, the first human standing all alone produces a negative reaction from God. The human, all alone, was the first and only act of creation declared *not good*; the human, all alone, inadequately reflected the goodness of God. The situation required the creation of a suitable helper in order for humanity to reflect God's image adequately. The human could not remain all alone within God's good creation. The narrative provides at least two relevant concepts. First, people are relational at the core of their nature. In order to be suitable, the helper removed the barrier of singularity that refrained the image of God in the first person from goodness. All other animals were unsuitable helpers. They could not fill the social void of human existence in the image of God (Grenz 275). The helper had to be *equal* in being to the first person; the partner had to be human (Bonhoeffer 97). Image bearers must reflect the Trinitarian relationship as a community of equals (Grenz 276). Man and woman, human male and female, both equally bear the image of God, but neither fully bears God's image without the other. "Humanity that is not shared humanity is inhumanity" (Jewett 36). Second, the helper had to be distinct from the first person, different in some way. Though equal as human, the first two persons were not the same; they were male and female (Ware 18). To be a

good reflection, they had to express particularity within plurality (Williams 197); they had to be equal and different at the same time.

The central focus of the story, rather than creation of the female out of the male, is the creation of human sexuality as an imprint of God's social nature (Grenz 298). Few people relate God's image with sexuality, but human sexuality drives many aspects of human behavior. Sexuality defines fashion from the color of baby clothing to swimsuit magazine editions. Sexuality motivates major portions of life from parental caution for teenage daughters to the never-ending search for romance. The human sexual drive explosively empowers each person's search for their beloved—akin to Adam's search to discover his suitable helper—a personal soul mate, a distinctly different other with which to form permanently the clearest image of Trinitarian love known to humans. The story reaches a crescendo as Adam excitedly and beautifully declares, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). "All human yearning for intimacy and union is a God-driven appetite to establish an image of the Trinity" (Joy, *Empower Your Kids* 81). The physical, emotional, and spiritual drive of human sexuality to become one flesh binds a man and a woman together in a lifelong dream of giving and receiving truth, respect, and love (Bonhoeffer 100).

The foundation of all human relationships is the union of a male and a female inseparably joined in an intimate partnership of equals to walk together through all the phases and circumstances of life. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). All other human relationships flow forth from this marital relationship. "The community of husband and wife is a community of love that is accepted as given by God and that glorifies and

worships God as the creator. It is therefore the church in its original form” (Bonhoeffer 100). A volitional commitment that faithfully endeavors to fulfill the dream marriage between male and female of one flesh, naked and unashamed, has the potential to express, as no other relationship can, a core aspect of human sexual identity that portrays the image of the Trinity in God’s image bearers.

Image seen as wisdom. Goodness as a foundational characteristic of God is different from what people usually call *good*. What people consider good often is discovered later not to be so good. Genetic engineering allows the production of more food, but food usually of lower quality, sometimes harmful and degrading to the environment. Pesticides, atomic energy, x-rays, and air conditioning improve the quality of life but come with hazardous side effects. Good, as relates to the works of humanity, does not portray an image of good acceptable as a foundational characteristic for God.

God is completely different from all creation, for in his essence God is good. God’s will is dedicated to all that is pure and right. No bad or evil thing dwells in God. Everything that is “worthy of approval” is good because in some form or fashion it resembles God (Grudem 197). God’s other attributes flow out of, are determined by, or are closely related to God’s will or determination to be good. Grudem explains, “God’s mercy is his goodness toward those in distress and his grace is his goodness toward those who deserve only punishment” (199). Innately, a list of things that are good, such as purity, kindness, and hope, can easily be compiled; such a list is innate to humans because people are created in God’s image. A perfect reflection of God would demonstrate such qualities unerringly. God-ness is goodness (Grudem 197; Williams 61).

God's lovingkindness, his goodness actively engaging creation, is reliable. God is always good and his goodness never changes in his relationships toward others. God's goodness expressed toward others over a period of time is faithfulness. As God's faithfulness finds someone in need of help, his mercy meets them there. People fall short again and again, requiring God to extend his mercy in the form of grace and kindness. Even after encountering grace and kindness, people struggling to overcome their sin discover God's kindness patiently encouraging them to stand back up and fight. These tender attributes of God might be mistaken for softness or weakness at times. They are not. God's lovingkindness is gentle but not weak. It expresses the greatness of his goodness through the restraint of humility, portraying the many facets of his goodness and strength like the hardest of all materials sparkling in the jeweler's showcase. Mercy, patience, and grace imbed the power of God's essential goodness within his creation.

The other side of God's power expresses a beauty just as great, that is, if the beholder stands on the side of justice. God's goodness toward the downtrodden expresses itself as protective care. He brings simple pleasures and provides humor, love, and passion to people who are held down by society. God's mercy, patience, and grace do not always endure cruelty and disadvantage. He will only hold himself back for a period, while injustice reigns, before his goodness expresses itself in wrath (Grudem 205-07). God knows what is best and the "best means to those goals" (193); God knows the right thing to do and the correct action to take in order to uphold his goodness. The wrath of God purposes to express goodness even though accused of being harsh and undesirable.

Living in wisdom reflects the nature of God's faithfulness to goodness. Scripture says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One

is understanding” (Prov. 9:10). Understanding the character of God and the ways of God, then choosing to act skillfully and with integrity upon that understanding, is wisdom. People develop personal strength and integrity of character by developing wisdom. A holy person consistently seeking wisdom over a period of time develops loyal friends. Everyone knows people of wisdom by their integrity; wise and holy people do not lie and cheat. Words spoken by such persons command respect because others know that such persons faithfully fulfill their vows. Promises from such people stand like covenants. Truly Christian marriage depends upon a marriage covenant pursued together by a wise man and a wise woman. The family built by two such people becomes the stronghold from which a local congregation launches both discipleship and outreach efforts. The fabric of God’s wisdom imprints a rich texture upon all who dare reflect his beauty.

Image seen as Trinity. Colossians 1:5 declares that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God.” Before Jesus was born, people may have been able to question the true character of God, but he who for so long had seemed so distant came near, God dwelling with people, among people, as a human being, too close to ignore. God may have walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden, but God incarnate brought an entirely new dimension to walking in the love of God, “for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son” (John 3:16). Through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, the relational characteristics of the triune Godhead, at which the Old Testament only hinted, blossoms with clarity. The true essence of the Trinity is goodness expressed through relationships of self-giving love.

John’s Gospel introduces the Trinitarian Godhead as equals. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The

Gospel of John portrays a journey with Jesus into the intimate relations that exist within the triune Godhead. Relationship within the Trinity is a major theme of the Gospel. By referencing the creation narrative, “In the beginning was the Word,” the Word must be the Old Testament God of creation. “The Word was with God.” God and Jesus are presented as distinct, yet the Old Testament declares the existence of only one God (Deut. 6:4). With this conundrum, the introduction of John’s Gospel conspicuously lays a foundation for discussing relationships within the triune Godhead. John equates Jesus to the Word, as becomes obvious in verse 14: “The Word became flesh.” Jesus, the Word, and God, as known in the creation narrative, “In the beginning,” are one and the same God. Relationships within the Trinity are relationships of equals.

The image of *equality* qualifies as an essential character of human identity that can be observed in all phases of life. As a child develops, the need for competence motivates tenacity; as adults, desires for respect and admiration often dominate career pursuits; and, for senior citizens, dignity remains as one of the great concerns. Persons involved in a relationship of true and pure love must be equals. Proper demonstration of equality prescribes seeking ways to honor one another as a dynamic that energizes marital relationships. A man and a woman never develop a satisfying relationship unless they honor and respect one another as equals in the image of God; husband and wife are distinctly different but equal. Equality within the triune Godhead imprints the core of human sexual identity.

As the Gospel of John unfolds, the intimacy of relationships within the Trinity of God becomes prevalent. John 1:18 states, in a direct wooden translation from Greek to English, the Son “is in the bosom of the Father” (Green 818). Stephen Seamands

translates this verse in more contemporary understanding: “who is close to the Father’s heart” (*Ministry* 36). Jesus is dear to the Father. They have a relationship of eternal intimacy. In chapter three, John the Baptist says, “The one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands” (3:34-35). The Father demonstrates vulnerable and intimate love for the Son by sharing the Spirit completely and demonstrates the highest form of honor in doing so. Sharing the Spirit completely denotes that, even though the Son has taken human form, he remains part of the Trinity. He is equally God. The Son not only knows every word spoken by the Father but also copies them and joyfully repeats them to others. Similar factors are related in chapter five. “Whatever the Father does the Son also does, for the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does” (19b-20a). The Son knows all that the Father has in mind. The Father does not ask the Son to submit blindly. The love of the Father for the Son demonstrates complete *self-disclosure* as an integral aspect of intimacy. Seamands portrays this characteristic of the Trinity as *joyful intimacy* (*Ministry* 58).

Most people wrongly consider God to be distant (Robinson). Even people who feel God is involved in their lives often see Jesus as kind and caring while Father God seems distant and critical to them, even mean. Part of the reason for this misconception comes from the ways people have been taught the stories of the Bible. Most of the Bible is narrative for good reason. Stories about real people related in word pictures capture the heart as well as the brain. Labels such as joyful intimacy do not penetrate people’s understanding like a good story does. In a recent novel, the main character, Mack, vividly dreams (or has a vision?) about a visit with the Trinity for several days in a shack. The

story captures Trinitarian relationship with penetrating impact. As Mack helps Papa make a pie, the following conversation ensues:

“How can you really know how I feel?” Mack asked, looking into Papa’s eyes. Papa didn’t answer, only looked down at their hands. His gaze followed and for the first time Mack noticed the scars, like those he now assumed Jesus also had on his wrists. Papa allowed him to tenderly touch the scars, outlines of a deep piercing, and he finally looked up again. Tears were slowly making their way down, little pathways through the flour that dusted Papa’s cheeks. “Don’t ever think that what my son chose to do didn’t cost us dearly. Love always leaves a significant mark. We were there together.” (Young 95-96)

The mental images and feelings created by the novel could be critiqued for accuracy, but the overall effect powerfully communicates the intimacy of God. Papa is near and dear.

A closer look at some of the passages in the Gospel of John reveals that *glad submission* travels in tandem with joyful intimacy (Seamands, *Ministry* 35). Returning to John 3, Jesus speaks the “words of God,” implying that he does not speak his own words. The Father demonstrably expresses his love for the Son by placing everything in his hands. Father God fully supports the Son’s efforts and withholds no resources, giving the Spirit without limit. The Son receives the love of the Father through the Spirit. The Spirit, in being given by Father God and coming upon God the Son, relates in willful submission without drawing attention to himself. A book of theological parables calls attention to the idea that willful submission within intimate relationships involves *mutual deference* (Shaw 62-63). No selfishness occurs between the Father and the Son. They seek the benefit and honor of the other. Mutual deference entails at least two people in a relationship of self-giving and self-receiving. Deference possesses the quality of gift giving. It entails crafting oneself into a gift of devoted love to a beloved other. Self-receiving requires joy. It is that special feeling of being cared for when given a gift. “To

say that God is love is to say that the Father and Son and the Spirit live to enjoy, honor, and serve one another eternally” (64). Growth toward glad submission and mutual deference in a marital relationship requires the partners to earn one another’s trust. Each spouse must give of self as a gift only in part to test the reception given by the other spouse. As the other spouse joyfully receives and accepts the self-revelation or self-sacrifice of the other with celebration, the giver feels treasured and loved. With wisdom, each spouse must protect deeper layers of self by incremental revelation. The marital relationship develops a structure of safety that both protects the individuality of each spouse and encourages the further intimacy through self-disclosure, self-sacrifice, and interdependence. The giving and receiving of self in such fashion turns sacrifice into joy for both the giver and the receiver.

In chapter five, John’s portrayal of Trinitarian relationships progresses to include *self-limitation*. “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does” (5:19). One could argue that this statement limits Jesus’ capabilities to those actions inspired by the Father and that setting limits on Jesus’ capabilities does not fit the free and almighty nature of God. Rather, a close examination of the passage reveals that Jesus limits himself only to those things that are pleasing to the Father, no more and no less, because of the Father’s love. Within the perfect joyful intimacy and mutual deference just discussed, the Trinity commits self-limitation with abandon. In so doing, Jesus always remains true to the nature of his being to love the Father and accept the love of the Father:

For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no

one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. (5:21-23)

In this continuation of the previous passage, the Father is the one limiting self and self-deferring in order that the Son may be given honor. Self-limitation within the Trinity is mutual. Glad submission and mutual deference within the Godhead include the facet of self-limitation as an act of identity. Self-limitation within the Trinity portrays the foundational character of God's goodness through personal identification as perfect, self-giving love.

People who limit their self-expression in order to honor and love each other deepen their relationships. William P. Young's novel that describes Mack's dream of a weekend visit with the Trinity memorably portrays an appreciation for such an attitude. Mack was getting ready for breakfast one morning when he heard a crash and looked into the kitchen to see Jesus grabbing a towel with which to clean the feet of Papa. As the Trinity cackle together in laughter, Mack ponders about the way they value one another:

So this was God in relationship? It was beautiful and so appealing. He knew that it didn't matter whose fault it was—the mess from some bowl had been broken, that a dish that had been planned would not be shared. Obviously, what was truly important here was the love they had for one another and the fullness it brought them. He shook his head. How different this was from the way he treated the ones he loved! (105)

Relationships of respect and vulnerable intimacy not only define God; they define the deepest of human longings as bearers of God's image.

John 17:11 portrays *perichoresis*, perhaps the most exciting and most difficult-to-understand aspect of Trinitarian love: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one." *Perichoresis* within the Trinity denotes goodness expressed through oneness. *Perichoresis*, this

incomprehensible idea of dwelling in one another, denotes the energy of intimate love. God's state of being the Trinity does not memorialize itself in a static or unmoving statue but in constant movement or motion such that the Trinity constantly focuses life and energy on, in, around, through, and from one another. One might think of Trinitarian relationships as the dance of life (Seamands, *Ministry* 144; "Perichoresis"; Grenz 316-17) with such devotion, enjoyment, enthusiasm, vitality, and coordinated speed that though always distinct, the three dance partners are not separate from the dance itself. The dance is their love, and they are the dance. The apostle John states, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Jesus remarked, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). As sinful creatures, people cannot fully comprehend this mystery of animated morality. The goodness of God exhibited in all wisdom, the structure of the Trinity as three equal but different and interdependent persons, the relationships within the Trinity of joyful intimacy, glad submission, and mutual deference creating an identity of self-giving love, and the movements or actions of the Trinity to create and to identify with that creation through self-giving love, these qualities and animated moralities, taken altogether, are God. This holistic sense of perichoresis portrays the essence of God's being. The fountain of life, which is God's perichoretic existence as Trinity, cannot be contained. It overflows into acts of creation and restoration. The mission of God seen as self-giving love towards creation cannot be separated from the identity of God or the very essence of God's goodness. "It is the nature of love to go out of itself, to be other centered, not self-centered" (Seamands, *Ministry* 63). Swirling in the dance of life, God's hand always extends outside, bidding others to join in the dance (15).

As image bearers of God, excellent family relationships imitate Trinitarian love. Dr. Donald M. Joy describes characteristics of healthy family systems using two major indicators. They give *high value* to each person by looking for ways to affirm each other and avoiding any form of degradation. They do not allow conflict to last, but protect one another and celebrate accomplishments. These families also *distribute responsibility*. They trust each other with important tasks. Each person's opinion is considered when making joint decisions. They help one another and depend on one another (*Risk-Proofing Your Family* 137-39). The characteristics that Joy uses to evaluate healthy family systems reflect the Trinitarian relational characteristics of equality, deference, interdependence, and self-limitation. Excellent family relationships look a lot like Trinitarian love.

The overflow of God's love incarnate glistens within the fulfilling aspects of human nature. People were created to accept God's hand extended. Only in loving God and being loved by God can the purpose of human creation find fulfillment. Secondly, the human drives of sexuality, creativity, and generation imitate God's overflowing, self-giving love. The core of human identity, especially sexual identity expressed through marriage, is patterned after the self-giving love of the Trinity. The most productive and fulfilling marital relationships skillfully image the self-giving love of the Trinity by joining God's dance of life with joyful intimacy, glad deference, and willful self-limitation.

God's Image Distorted

The Bible uses the classic theme of romance to illustrate the distortions of God's image now inherent to all people. Few books or movies do not contain some sort of romance story about the ongoing struggle against many obstacles that a man and a

woman must overcome to develop and maintain a relationship of true love. As in any classic story of human romance, boy and girl cannot simply meet, get married, and live happily ever after. Their love must be challenged in some way. Genesis is no different. Unexpectedly, the creation of the first human couple does not end with the declaration that their creation “is good” as all other creation accounts ended in chapter one. The detailed version of creation in chapter two climaxes not in the discovery of true love, but with Adam and Eve embarking on the journey of life together (Grenz 278). Chapter three immediately complicates the creation narrative. In the theme of a romance classic, the image of God, so peacefully and vividly animated in the man and woman, becomes distorted by sin.

The original sin, by the original couple, both included and deformed all of their relationships. As stewards of the garden, Adam and Eve not only maintained the garden, but were allowed to eat any fruit they found desirable except the fruit of one tree. With that one rule about that one tree, God gave the original couple the opportunity to express their love for him by joining together in self-limitation. They were allowed to eat any fruit they found desirable except the fruit of one tree. Such self-limitation would have affirmed acceptance of their status and identity as creation rather than creator, as image bearers rather than God. Glad deference to God’s will would have lovingly honored God and expressed the true order of the relationship. To demonstrate their love in such a manner invited an atmosphere of peace and fulfillment in their identity and unity together as image bearers, but they doubted the goodness of God and in disobedience rejected their created order. They ate the fruit. The act perverted their relationship to nature as stewards of the garden. They acted in self-promotion, distrust, disloyalty, unfaithfulness,

solitary self-realization, and self-gratification. They chose to deform the image of God's unity that dwelt in their marriage. They distorted perichoresis with ungodly, de-energizing attributes. Instead of trust, they blamed each other. Rather than full disclosure, they sought leaves to hide their nakedness. As implied within the curse, original sin irreparably distorted the first human family (Gen. 3:16-19). A curse came to overshadow the roles of husband and wife, father and mother. Sweat and toil signify that the earth no longer submits to the human function of stewardship. Pain in childbirth reveals distortion of the substance of the original couple. Sin distorted all relationships, all functions, and even the substance of the original couple (Klassen).

The community of human beings multiplied into villages and cities cluttered all along the way with ever-increasing distortions of God's image. Forced out of paradise, Adam and Eve began to have children. The opening of Genesis chapter five begins a new phase of image bearing as signaled by a literary link to the first creation story (Dongell). When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son "in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth" (Gen. 5:1-3). The potential to reflect wondrously the perichoresis of God's self-giving love still existed, but was so marred that even the perception of God through the image became tainted. "What makes sin so serious is precisely the fact that man is now using God-given and God-imaging powers and gifts to do things that are an affront to his Maker" (Hoekema 72). The sinful nature of humanity became attached to specific sinful behaviors and misperceptions of reality passed on in the form of generational sin. The distorted image of God among people passed from generation to generation through the family.

The distortions increased with the generations until all but one of God's image bearers had become irreversibly unacceptable. Through Noah, God gave the image bearers a second chance. The second chance also failed. Inclined to distortion, God's image bearers did not receive a third chance. God intervened via the Tower of Babel. He caused people to speak a variety of languages. That action separated people into cultures with differing values and perspectives of reality. The separation and the differences disunited distortions of God's image and their transmission among future generations.

No longer one common humanity, the resulting nations and ethnicities exhibited different perceptions of the world and different emphases of distortion. The wonder of God's image, though distorted, remained in the core of humanity. It expressed potential at every level of human relationships from marriage to family to community to nation. Faith, conflict, greed, and hope intermingled as each generation grew into adulthood. Families multiplied and chose leaders. Nation came into conflict against nation. To this day distortions of God's image express themselves at every level—from simple insults to mass genocide. As Paul proclaimed of himself, so should all people exclaim, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24). Humanity cannot rescue themselves.

God's Image Restored

Along with the curse upon the first couple came a promise of hope through their descendants. In Genesis chapter 12, that promise took the form of a blessing through the descendants of Abraham. Genesis, the rest of the Pentateuch, and the entire Old Testament relayed similar messages in a variety of formats. Finally, in the New Testament, the descendant God promised to Adam, Eve, and Abraham revealed himself.

Jesus, God incarnate, demonstrated the image of God made perfect as a human (Col. 1:15). Through the cross, Jesus provided a means for the Holy Spirit to bring new creation to people and birth the Church, a people being transformed toward God's image. The following section explores, in the Epistle to the Ephesians, how the same resurrection power of the Holy Spirit progressively works to heal the distortions of God's image in and among Christians today. It focuses on how the church can partner with God in this process and describes transformation of marital relationships as a key factor in the process.

In eternity. A comparison between the creation of God's image in people and the destiny preordained by God for all those who accept new life in Christ helps create a canvas upon which to inscribe the processes of restoration in Pauline literature. Both the distortions and the restoration of God's image in humanity unfold between two bookends of the Bible. Both bookends portray humanity ideally living in a perfect husband and wife relationship. At the front end, God created people in his image as male and female. That first human couple distorted God's image and started the journey of human existence for all people in pain and difficulty. On the back side, after the resurrection, Jesus will join with the Church to restore God's image perfectly as the final human couple. The magnitude of the restored image for humanity necessitates a look to the future when the last human couple will live forever enthralled with the fullness of life and love.

I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the

old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” (Rev. 21:2-5)

“Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. (Rev. 21:9-10)

The drama of people dwelling forever with God presents powerful images. Dynamics of Trinitarian relationships tumble out with excitement. The bride and groom are similar, but different. They are similar in that Jesus and his Bride, the Church, are both resurrected humans. They are completely different, for Jesus is God and the Bride is God’s image bearer. The eternal couple lives in self-limiting love. The groom dies for his Bride in sacrificial love. The Bride consists of people who in their sin were unacceptable and yet are made perfect and beautiful by accepting the groom’s sacrifice. Their mutual deference is demonstrated as dwelling places. The Church becomes the New Jerusalem, God’s place of habitation (Fee 72). In verse 22, the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple and the light of the city. In chapter 22, the Spirit is the river that gives life to all who dwell in the city. These abundant images portray the perichoresis of God who has asked his redeemed people to join in the exuberant dance of life (Joy, *Bonding* 141).

Together they move with such fluidity that the entire scene seems almost calm, yet bursting with energy and grandeur all at the same time. God and his image bearers will one day relish in the life of God’s perfect love forever. Upon the return of Jesus, all true followers of Christ will experience resurrection and the identity of their inheritance as children of God will be revealed. The picture of the Bride of Jesus sharing fully and eternally in God’s perichoresis portrays the identity of *being in Christ*. This concept of the Christian’s identity can be understood through the analogy of a young prince being

groomed to one day become the king. The prince has much to learn, but the knowledge that he shall one day be king gives him a personal identity through which to endure all the lessons of instruction with great hope and pride. The perfect image of God that believers will become in eternity should be the self-image or personal identity out of which they approach transformation toward that image in this life.

In Christ. Until that time when the perfect image is revealed in the eternal Church, God is working through local congregations to heal the distortions that create havoc and pain for all humanity. The Epistle to the Ephesians describes several pertinent aspects of the process of restoration. In the first chapter of Ephesians, Paul defines the Church as people adopted by God *in Christ*. Joining the Church occurs as people experience the call of the Father, choosing them *in Christ* by extending his grace in love (1:3-8). Being in Christ signifies the identity of believers as adopted children from God's perspective (Grudem 840-42). To be in Christ means the blood of Jesus provides redemption and forgiveness (Eph. 1:7). The Holy Spirit seals them in Christ with wisdom and revelation of truth (13-17). They are alive in Christ (2:5), seated with Christ in heavenly realms (2:6), saved (2:8), and created for good works (2:10). Paul piled these metaphors one upon the other in an almost overwhelming fashion. He wanted to penetrate past all preconceived ideas so the Ephesians might grasp how important and valuable they were to God (3:18). Being *in Christ* made them different from before. The love, sacrifice, and power of the Trinity created a new identity for them. Being *in Christ* means new resurrection life from the Holy Spirit dwells within every true believer. It guarantees the hope of being perfected as the Bride of Christ to dance the dance of life with God for all eternity (Eph. 1:14, 18).

New life through the Spirit begins a process of incremental transformation in all aspects of human existence. Transformational discipleship brings people closer to experiencing and demonstrating the energizing perichoresis of dwelling with God and with one another in unity. The relationship believers have with the Holy Spirit includes a deep conversation at core levels of existence where the person hears God's voice speaking to them personally as God's beloved. Paul uses metaphors for these whispers from the Holy Spirit throughout his writings. In Galatians they are described as keeping in step. "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). Maintaining the flow of new life means listening for the Spirit to speak, heeding the instructions of the Spirit, obeying his commands, and receiving his healing touch. These deep conversations with the Spirit of Christ empower the believer "from the inside out" (Boa 103) with strength for transformation. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in chapter three refers to these deep engagements. He requests the Father to "strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being" (3:16). Paul goes on to request the Ephesians be given power "to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge" (vv. 18-19). A qualitative study that investigated personal journals found a consistent pattern in which participants encountered God at the core of their persons. God apparently engaged them emotionally, intellectually, and at some other level, generally called soul or heart, which appeared to be separate from, though closely linked to, emotion and intellect (Davis 391). Similar to what people described in their journals, personal conversations of transformation in Christ include the mind and delve deep into parts of human identity that the mind cannot comprehend. The power of the Holy Spirit applies the moral character and the social

being of the triune God to these deep levels of the human heart so that “you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (3:19). The whisper of the Holy Spirit to the human soul begins a process of healing and transformation.

Individual soul-level transformation only relays part of the picture. Having described personal transformation at the soul level, with the word “therefore” (2:11), Paul changes his focus to the larger group. Several metaphors emphasize the community aspects of the church. The chosen ones comprise the citizens of a new nation upon the earth (2:11-15). By the Spirit of God, they were joined together as God’s temple in the body of Christ (2:21; 4:12). They were chosen to be a people who call on the name of God together (2:18). Paul’s description of transformation in the letter to the Ephesians is not simply individualistic. It encompasses community as well as individual transformation.

Having described their new life and new identities *in Christ* for three chapters, Paul transitions in chapter four to the efforts required of believers by urging the Ephesians “to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (4:1). Similar to the way in which identity in Christ was both singular and plural, responsibility for transformation takes on an image of interdependent unity. Paul clearly proclaims individual responsibility, “to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (4:7). He further describes how leaders should encourage interdependence. He first relates such interdependence in terms of the congregation and, later, focuses on the importance of interdependent relationships within family systems.

Paul instructs the Ephesians to help others learn to minister the transformational power of the Holy Spirit to one another in the church:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (4:12-13)

The terminology reflects back to chapter three where Paul describes the Holy Spirit working deep in the heart of individual believers that they "attain the whole measure of the fullness of God" (v. 13). A threefold interdependence between individuals, congregation, and God could not be more completely expressed than in the following verses:

Then we will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (4:14-16)

Paul strongly implies the development of trusting relationships, relationships through which believers challenge one another to accept grace for transformation. The local congregation matures as relationships start to form an image of Trinitarian characteristics. Transformational life in Christ operates most efficiently in an environment of healthy relational systems in which individuals sensitively, wisely, and skillfully interact in transparent community without losing their respective identities. In order to develop unity, individuals must take responsibility to live by faith (4:1-2; 5:1-2). In order to build up one another in faith, the community must express loving encouragement (4:11-16). Later, Paul skillfully narrows his focus upon how these relational aspects of the congregation establish themselves in the subsystem of the family. The community ministers as individuals do their part, but individuals need the ministry of the community

in order to grow to maturity (Samra 151). The two synergistically combine to escalate transformation (Hoekema 89). The church, as Paul envisioned, should portray the love of God as unity in diversity.

A second look at the previous passage reveals compassionate mission as a major goal of maturity. God gives the church all the resources needed to accomplish the task. The Spirit transforms people to do good works (2:10) and gives leaders to the church to “prepare each other for mission and ministry to the world” (Van Engen 50). For the body of Christ to be built up, the mission to make disciples must include both maturing those already *in Christ* and bringing other people *into Christ*. The energy and motivation to reach beyond self and share Christ must become active in order for spiritual maturity to reach a vitality that appropriately portrays the *perichoresis* of God’s love. As Seamands explains, the church should not be praying for passion to reach the world for Christ but should be asking, “What hinders us from joining what God is already doing?” (*Ministry* 168-69). The Trinitarian circle of love cannot be perceived as a “closed circle” (163). The church infected by the love of God should become the church of mission. If it does not, the church should try to answer Seamands’ question.

The next section of the epistle, Ephesians 4:17-5:14, expounds the process of individual transformation in the image of God. The passage forms a contrast between the futile darkness of the old self “which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires” (4:22) and the light of Christ that shines on (5:14) the new self “created to be like God” (4:24). Paul plainly expresses the responsibility of individuals to progress in God’s image in the imperative, “be imitators of God, therefore as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us” (5:1-2). Though the specific content of the passage focuses on

individual responsibility for transformation, the entire treatise is built around the theme of God's mission to bring light into darkness. Personal humanity is never simply personal when it reflects the image of God.

Paul bridges personal transformation to relational transformation with a powerful reminder that all transformation operates through interdependence on God's Spirit. "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18). Alcohol influences every thought, motive, action, and feeling of an inebriated person. Conversely, maturity in Christ yields every thought, attitude, action, and behavior to the influence of the Holy Spirit. This simple analogy contains one of the most powerful statements of Ephesians. Paul formulates how the processes of discipleship and spiritual formation operate in the daily lives of believers. Christians have been given the opportunity to love God in ways similar to the original opportunity given to Adam and Eve. In self-limiting love, God waits on deep-level conversations without forcing the relationship. He submits to their choices. Transformation depends upon their willingness to love back. God defers to his people by empowering their growth towards a measure of fullness. In joyful intimacy, he reveals his will to his people through soul-level conversations, through the encouragement of other believers, through the guidance of Spirit gifted leadership, and through Scripture. The process of spiritual formation *in Christ* occurs through the life-giving love of the Holy Spirit within an intimate relationship of self-limitation, glad deference, and joyful intimacy between God and believers that Paul calls "filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18).

Paul's Spirit-filled life formula for transformation expresses itself first and foremost in family relationships. His perception of the process whereby Christians attain

a measure of maturity was not centered in preaching and sacraments. Paul focuses on small family units infused with vigor by the Holy Spirit. He envisioned people from different family units developing intimate, trusting relationships through which they encourage and challenge one another toward transformational encounters in Christ. Spirit-filled transformation occurs in the deep recesses of the inner being as Christians endeavor to develop excellent family relationships that mirror the mutual submission of the Trinity.

For example, discipleship demonstrated through mutual submission within a nuclear family unit might resemble the following scenario. A small child begins to learn of love through the gentle caring of its mother. As the child grows, he or she learns to receive love joyfully as a gift from both parents. Through the role models of his or her father and mother living in mutual submission to each other, the image of God imprinted upon the child develops many godly characteristics (Joy, *Bonding* 24). As the child grows, many other people contend with the family for attention. A battle ensues over who will have greatest influence on the child's expressions of relationships. Cultural imprints of individualistic or communal patterns of personal identity, "I and you," also begin to characterize the young person's life. The Trinitarian image of God is clarified or further distorted by all these influences. As the youngster reaches teenage years, sexual drives encourage the teen to search for a beloved life partner. The wisdom and faith upon which they establish their relationship most often reflect the elements passed to them by their parents. They eventually establish themselves as parents and grandparents. By the end of life, those who were once babies in the total care of their parents change roles again from giver to receiver as someone becomes their caretakers. Through the many phases of life,

family systems, organizations, and culture impact the expression of God's image (Thompson 19-20). Paul expects the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to influence all these relational systems.

The overall picture of the church crafted by Paul in Ephesians portrays individuals encountering the transformational whispers of the Holy Spirit as they endeavor to develop intimate family relationships of mutual submission. As those family systems grow in vitality, they develop trusting and loyal relationships with people in other families of the church. The shared love of Christ among families creates excitement to reach out and touch the world with compassionate works of service. Anointed and indwelt by the power of the Holy Spirit, family members go throughout society in their daily lives developing extraordinary relationships and performing acts of compassionate service that draw others from outside the church into lives of transformation. Transformation is demonstrated most fundamentally within marital and family relationships.

In marriage. The purest and most intimate expression of God's image occurs within the relationship between a husband and a wife dedicated to live their entire lives together in mutual submission. In order to communicate the restoration of God's image in a marriage filled with mutual submission, three terms need to be defined.

The *marital relationship* comprises the dynamic interactions that characterize the partnership of a couple participating in marriage.

A *marriage covenant* consists of permanent commitments from a man to one woman and from that same woman back to the man recognized legally and socially as establishing a marriage.

Marriage is not easily defined. As discussed previously, human sexuality drives people to search for a beloved other with whom they can develop a permanent relationship that fulfills the social image of God that is fundamental to the core of human identity. Starting from the initial meeting between a man and a woman, sharing glances at one another and listening to the tones of each other's voices, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual bonds tie them together (Joy, *Bonding* 32-55). Empowered by sexual drives, pair bonding, social pressure, and the experiences of their partnership together in life, the couple anticipates their potential for intimacy. In spite of its potential, the marital relationship always falls short of perfect. The distorted images passed down from previous generations express themselves in daily life.

Intimacy, encouragement, personal esteem, self-revelation, and shared life at times enthrall the couple, but never so completely that their innate desire to love a beloved and be loved by the beloved permanently fulfill the deepest longings of their hearts. Hurt, frustration, and disappointment build within the psyche of the man and woman over time. Blame and discontent settle in their hearts unless they actively resist. These fester into anger, bitterness, and reproach.

Desire for the *beloved* tires. Dreams that once anticipated ecstatic intimacy die, leaving apathy in their place. Hearts become hard toward one another. The hard heart chooses to isolate itself from the possibility of further disappointment, pain, and rejection. The once tender heart of affection that longed for nearness now seeks distance. Jesus stated, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard" (Matt. 19:8). Divorce, the dissolution of marriage, results from a hard heart. A hard heart of divorce toward one's spouse reveals the sinful tendency in every person to seek

personal, individual fulfillment. It looks inward. The opposite of self-giving love, this tendency promotes self without regard for the other and damages the soul.

The attitude of marriage is the opposite of divorce. Marriage resists divorce with ferocity. Marriage is the attitude of resistance against all forces that would subdue the human heart with hardness towards the beloved marriage partner.

Marriage is a fierce, soul-level determination to maintain a tender heart towards one's beloved partner in the marriage covenant through all the phases of life, coming as close as possible to helping him or her find fulfillment as beloved and encouraging him or her to grow in maturity.

In marriage, a human male and a human female determine to bind themselves together in a partnership through which they can safely take a lifetime learning to express the image of God's love to one another. Christian marriage empowers itself in Christ. Each partner listens for the voice of the Holy Spirit in soul-level conversations that lead them individually to develop inner desires to care more about their spouses than about themselves. With wise advice, modeling, and the encouragement of other Christians, they discover ways of relating to one another in glad submission, mutual deference, and joyful intimacy. Christian marriage never reaches perfection in Christ, but couples living in Christ are apt to forgive more easily and show appreciation more generously. They learn to accept each other's weaknesses on a daily basis and praise one another's achievements. Living in Christ in marriage, a couple can establish the foundation for a family system that starts breaking patterns of sinfulness passed down from previous generations and pass on more intimate love patterns to next generations.

The influence of a married couple upon their children is among the most strategic and effective means of discipleship. Joy describes children's experiences of life with their parents as their "first curriculum" (*Risk-Proofing Your Family* 22). His comments suit the nuclear family most accurately, but they can be adapted to any family system. Family takes a multiplicity of forms in contemporary America and congregations must endeavor to accept and love people from every status. They must endeavor to disciple every type of person to live in Christ (Patton). The people most consistently and significantly responsible to care for a child are that child's first curriculum. The curriculum includes relationship dynamics between people in intimate relationships, male and female roles, acceptance, affirmation, personal worth, and value systems (Joy, *Risk-Proofing Your Family* 21-36). The lives of significant caretakers greatly determine the clarity or distortion with which a child learns to reflect the image of God. When Christians within a family system of any nature yield to the Spirit in Christ and learn to depend upon his transformational power to help them live together in peace, the patterns of harmful behavior and sinful motives that they inherited begin to diminish. Enabled to develop relationships of greater purity and faithfulness, they pass on the hope of establishing vivacious marriages full of verve to the next generation. The two generations, sometimes more, learn to express love to each other through all the phases of a lifetime and start a cycle of restoration that can spread far beyond the initial family system. Transformation in Christ through husband and wife is among the most strategic discipleship efforts the church can offer.

Conclusion of Theological Reflections

In stark contrast to common American perceptions of rugged individualism, the Bible portrays personhood as originating in the creation of people in God's image. A holistic view of the *imago Dei* accepts the validity of all the traditional views but considers each one incomplete. The sin of the original couple, however, perverted the image of God in all the relationships people experience including relationships with God, with other people, and with nature. From that time to now, humanity has passed an image of God distorted by sin from generation to generation. Even so, each person as an image bearer holds inestimable value but requires transformation through the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit to restore clarity to the *imago Dei*. The process of renewal, as found in the Epistle to the Ephesians, occurs progressively through interdependent relationships empowered in Christ.

The most consistent and foundational relationship for transformation occurs through marriage where both the singular and plural expressions of God's image are tied at the soul level through sexual identity passed forward to the next generations. The development of discipleship dynamics through families forms a major strategy in Ephesians. Families facilitate the capabilities of family members to touch the lives of others. Local congregations should consider these dynamics when forming and evaluating discipleship efforts. In order to be useful in the development of discipleship tools, a schematic for God's image should observe a multifaceted reflection of God seen as wisdom, as mature sexuality, and as Trinitarian relationship qualities. Disciple-making strategies need to include touching the daily lives of the congregation in terms of dedication to Spirit-filled intimacy with God, growth in moral character, relational

excellence within family systems, concern between families demonstrated through trusting relationships, and a passion for mission. A firm foundation of theological thought supports the study of how and to what extent marriage enhancement efforts in the local church influence other facets of spiritual growth.

Research Literature

The hypothesis introduced in Chapter 1 proposed that strong marital relationships help build caring family relational systems upon which the church can grow a more mature community of believers. To test the hypothesis, this project investigated in what ways enhancing the marital relationship affects the spiritual growth processes of the couple and whether enhancing the marital relationship enhances a couple's ability to make positive contributions to their church. The hypothesis and the project assume family relational systems are the building blocks of church community structures. This assumption is based upon a model of discipleship found in Pauline epistles that suggests the object of discipleship is both individual and community maturation.

This review of current research literature will attempt to establish why such a dualistic model of discipleship should be tested within the American church. After investigating the need for such efforts, this review examines a biblical discipleship theory proposed by James G. Samra that suggests the church's role in discipleship is to facilitate five components of spiritual formation. Family systems of congregational members facilitate both individual and community maturation. Marital relationship dynamics will be considered to demonstrate the intertwined complexity of factors relevant to this study. Finally, this review identifies a significant gap in research literature regarding the study of whether enhancement of marital relationship dynamics influences spirituality.

The Need for Enhanced Discipleship

Through Jesus' death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit institutes the means by which people can overcome sin, experience transformation, and more clearly present God's reign in their hearts. Jesus challenged the church to partner with God in this process of overcoming sin, but making disciples who obey all that Jesus commanded encompasses a complex and difficult task. This section reviews evidence from statistical surveys, theologians, and a proliferation of experimental church models that show American Christians encounter many obstacles to maturation. The next section suggests that a richer understanding of discipleship might be helpful.

Like a camera lens coming into focus, each generation of individual Christians and communities of believers should always move away from sinfulness toward clarity in God's image. Recent statistics for the American church do not match that goal. Divorce rates inside and outside the church are almost identical (Barna Group, "New Marriage"). Recent surveys divulge a consistent decline in the percentage of Americans that consider identification with Christian churches an important aspect of their spirituality (Malloch 1). This decline denotes special concern for passing faith to next generations. Stories abound of teenagers who, though they had been deeply involved in church youth groups, leave their Christian faith behind as they enter adulthood (Devries 22). Two-thirds of Americans in their twenties who were actively involved in church during their teens no longer maintain a high level of spirituality (Barna Group, "Most Twentysomethings"). Especially disconcerting, the young adults who stay involved in church during their twenties often tend toward less mature Christian lifestyles than young adults who consider their Christian faith important but cease participation with organized church

(“Faith Revolutionaries”). A 2007 survey revealed that only 16 percent of Americans aged sixteen to twenty-nine have a favorable impression of Christianity and only 3 percent express favorable views toward evangelicals (“New Generation”). In light of such evidence, the average church in America cannot claim consistent movement toward a clear presentation of the image of God through the lifestyles of its people.

The REVEAL research conducted by the Willow Creek Association between January 2007 and February 2008 ranks among the most influential research projects in American church history with 136,547 completed surveys returned for the third phase from 487 churches in seventeen countries (Hawkins and Parkinson 144). Through a combination of sixty-eight qualitative interviews in 2006 and input from such well-known Christian leaders as Dallas Willard, J. I. Packer, and Larry Crab, they based their original survey questions on the “Christian Life Profile Assessment” (35). Created by Randy Frazee, the profile was developed in coordination with several church leaders and refined through forums such as “The Spiritual State of the Union” sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania and the Gallup Organization. The study greatly impacted the research sponsors. In response to the initial findings of the study, the senior pastor at Willow Creek Community Church exclaimed in a nationally broadcast presentation, “I was blown away by the results” (Hybels). They had spent millions of dollars each year to produce the highest possible quality weekend meetings, but the results of the study revealed that those expensive services only influence the spiritual growth of the least mature people. The people most involved in the activities of their church were not the people with the highest levels of spirituality. In fact, church activity did not correlate with spiritual growth. Hybels expressed his concern that the church had not helped the people

become self-feeders. Hawkins, the executive pastor for Willow Creek and a major contributor to the REVEAL project, describes that discovery as the reason they decided radically to change the way they approach church. The findings were nationally broadcast and the results published. Some people considered the less than complimentary results confirmation of their long-standing critique of the compromised theology and poor ecclesiology upon which seeker-sensitive churches operated (Groothuis; Scaramanga). The context of the study, however, disintegrated critical reactions and amplified the importance of the response from Willow Creek staff. Of the churches from which surveys were received, 51 percent did not describe themselves as seeker-sensitive, only 29 percent were nondenominational, and 58 percent had less than five hundred in weekly attendance. The REVEAL study expressed a broad spectrum of American denominations and methodologies, demonstrating a lack of effective discipleship throughout American churches.

This lack of effective discipleship cannot be ignored. Discipleship in the context of the American church struggles for adequacy. Dallas Willard comments, “It is hard to identify a specifically Christian version of spiritual formation” because “I know of no current denomination or local congregation that has a concrete plan and practice for teaching people” and “very few even regard this as something we should actually try” (256). A commission formed to examine ways of promoting mission through the local church states, “We cannot approach the task of being and becoming a missionary church in North America as though our cultural context were a clean slate” (Guder 222). They demanded the biblical intent for churches be reexamined to create organizations that carry out that intent.

Over the last two decades, many leaders have attempted to start alternative forms of church. Carl F. George suggests a meta-church model that reorganized the church around small group structures. Ralph W. Neighbor and William A. Beckham propose a change of emphasis to the cell group church in which large gatherings support the small group foundation of the church. Frazee proposes to restructure such that large, medium, and small groups function together to recreate parish ministries within the context of the larger church. Movements to start new types of churches have multiplied since the 1990s. The emerging church movement and Emergent Church dialogue, held as two entirely separate entities by some people (McKnight) and considered synonymous with each other and a multiplicity of other efforts around the globe by others (Smith), attempted to harness the dissatisfaction of younger Christians into a renewing force for Christianity. Not to discredit a few efforts that made temporary progress (Hirsch 33), most of the new churches either focused on styles of presentation or attempted to decentralize leadership in order to concentrate on developing relationships. Those movements have become diverse and less unified in recent years, to the point that many of the early leaders no longer desire to be associated with those labels (Bendis; O'Brien 14).

The *new monastic* movement of communities offers a particularly prophetic challenge to the American church. The leaders of these groups find places they believe need a Christian presence and move there. Several families typically live either in one house together or very close to each other in separate houses or apartments. Some of them practice shared finances. They work toward building an intimate community of believers who dedicate themselves to living out the Bible as completely as they can. Nearly all of them perform some sort of missional service to the communities around

them. *New monastics* try to create alternative cultures within America rather than the typical Christian subculture (Byassee 47) in an attempt to form more complete followers of Christ.

The challenge from new monasticism begs the question whether people in new monastic communities live a more biblical lifestyle than other American Christians. These communities offer potential laboratories for investigating new forms of Christian ministry, but a limited number of American Christians are likely to experience their influence. Very few American Christians can relate to people in a communal setting who have intentionally chosen to stop seeking after the American dream in order to love one another through long-term, interfamily commitments. As Stanley Hauerwas states, “What do I need, or what do we need, to be a community of friends that cannot only tell one another the truth, but want to be told the truth?” (Jones). The following section suggests that the Bible describes complex discipleship processes that could help inform attempts to evaluate current discipleship efforts.

A Bidirectional Process of Discipleship

A competent theology of discipleship must define both what Christian maturity looks like and the processes by which the Bible declares maturity is achieved. The picture painted in the theological reflections expressed Christian maturity as consistent movement toward a clear image of the triune God. That image includes integrity, wisdom, and relational quality. Even more profound, from an American perspective, Christian maturity is both individual and plural; each person should grow toward maturity and communities of believers should grow toward maturity. Each family should develop relationships that exhibit ever more clearly an image of the Trinity in mission. The

following section adds texture to these ideas of discipleship by examining a presentation of discipleship processes found in the Pauline epistles. Similar to earlier observations about teachings from Ephesians, the marital relationship facilitates full-orbed discipleship for congregations.

Samra performed an extensive investigation of spiritual maturity according to the Pauline Epistles, which he undergirded with historical studies of ancient near Eastern communities and a survey of modern psychology literature (xi). His findings regarding discipleship unveiled a complex biblical process related to the renewed emphasis upon Trinitarian theology that made a large impression upon my theological review. Samra uncovered five components to Paul's process of maturation (112-31):

Identifying with Christ,

Enduring suffering,

Experiencing the presence of God,

Receiving and living out wisdom from God, and

Imitating a godly example.

These components describe a bidirectional process of discipleship in which individual growth and community growth consistently impact each other.

Identifying with Christ is more than a mark of maturity; it is also a means of growth toward maturity. Dedication of self to Christ is prerequisite to maturation, but the process of working out that attitude by developing faith to live out the mind of Christ in daily life makes the difference between good intentions and a Spirit-filled life. To be wholly in Christ requires putting away old desires to embody all Jesus represents. Most American Christians do not recognize the community aspect of identifying with all that

Jesus represents. Identifying oneself with the body of Christ broadens the definition of family. All followers of Christ have become, and should be treated as, fellow members of God's family. Creating an intimate church at home by honoring and respecting one's spouse as a child of God bears exceptionally potent results. A truly significant expression of identifying with the body of Christ does not exist when two Christians live in a divided marriage (Thomas 34). Working out identity in Christ in Ephesians requires mutual submission between marriage partners. Developing a marital relationship that demonstrates Trinitarian relational dynamics enhances spiritual growth for both partners and empowers a united ministry to build up others in the congregation. Identifying with Christ is both a mark of maturity and a component of the growth process that consistently links individual and community growth through the mediating factor of family relationships.

Samra found *enduring suffering* to be one of Paul's most significant catalysts for spiritual maturation. It directly challenges the American dream of wealthy independence and is an unpopular, weakly understood concept in the church. To identify with Christ in suffering brings not only a new closeness to God but builds characteristics of patience and empathic care toward others. It is a means of transformation so long as people endure suffering through reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit and in the desire to be like Christ. Having endured, they develop steadfastness and hope. Married couples who endure suffering together deepen their marital bonds, create more resilient family dynamics, and build a broader foundation for community encouragement. Married couples who respond poorly to difficulty or find no support from the community of believers lose intimacy and spread discouragement. Enduring suffering is an integral,

though unpopular, component of growth that demonstrates the importance of strong marriage partnerships in the community of believers.

People change through direct divine intervention while *experiencing the presence of God*. Whether in times of teaching, meditation, and prayer or through the encouragement of another Christian functioning in charismatic gifts from the Holy Spirit, the presence of God transforms both the giver or teacher and the receiver or learner. The means of experience include sensory modes such as visions and dreams along with extrasensory modes such as peacefulness and soul conversation. When at least two Christians seek God together, whether as a married couple or an entire congregation, a special presence of God exists (Matt. 18:20). The touch of God's presence as a component of transformational growth should never be underestimated in the congregation or in the home.

Receiving and living out wisdom from God comes through teaching, Scripture study, and meditation. According to Paul, receiving wisdom also comes via other believers, especially through Spirit-inspired gifts such as prophecy and discernment. Encouragement from other believers includes forms of "urging, instruction, negative reinforcement (warning, rebuke, and consequences) and positive reinforcement (praise and reward)" (Samra 125). Living with wisdom requires maintaining a tension between private expressions of godliness and relational integrity. Scripture may speak to the heart, but strength of character can only be developed within relationship. This interaction between the individual and the community rarely finds a healthy balance in American culture, not excluding the American church (Gibson 301). Because of the necessary long-term endurance of marital relationships, making wise decisions together spells the

difference between life well-lived and disaster. Encouragement of believers between families cannot make consistent positive impact unless encouragement through mutual submission is first observed in the home. As Paul signifies in Ephesians, wise enhancement of the marital relationship plays a primary role in believer-to-believer encouragement in the church. All other relationships fade in comparison. The wisdoms of integrity, judgment, and healthy relationships emanate from marriage to each spouse and back, down to their children, and throughout the congregation. Developing all forms of wisdom can make or break spiritual growth for individuals, families, and congregations.

Imitating a godly example, whether a distant example such as Father God, Jesus, or the Apostle Paul or a close example such as a more mature believer, registers as a major theme in the Pauline Epistles. Godly role models are primary aspects of identifying with the incarnation of Christ. Paul describes people imitating the faith of other people when enduring suffering, displaying compassion, showing the ability to care, giving of self in sacrificial love, finding unity to overcome factions, and wholehearted devotion to Christ. Examples of mutual submission in the home through the marital relationship and the parent-child relationship create the foundation for other roles. The greatest amount of time and quality of discipleship teaching between generations occurs within the home. Without consistency at home, people can be neither good teachers nor consistently willing learners. Participation as a role model in the home and imitating the godly example of others in the home function as foundational aspects of spiritual formation.

The marital relationship appears foundational to effective discipleship within each component of the discipleship process. Paul's biblical model of discipleship toward spiritual maturation was the basis of his life's work and the purpose for which he founded

churches. He expected churches to form mature believers by “facilitating the five components of the process of maturation” (Samra 169). The process of maturing the community cannot be separated from the process of maturing individuals within the community. Transformation empowered by the Holy Spirit occurs through a complex, multilayered, bidirectional flow of ministry from the congregation to the individual and reciprocal ministry by the individual within the congregation. Daily life in marriage and family tests, purifies, and solidifies individual growth. The skills learned and unity developed within the marital relationship mediate the encouragement potentials of the spouses to the greater community. Marriage and marital relationship dynamics facilitate individual and community maturation.

Spiritual Formation of the Individual

Theories of human development and spiritual growth contain many potential points of view with which church leadership could evaluate, augment, and improve their discipleship efforts. A brief review of several well-known theories gives a context within which to place the vast majority of discipleship programs and research. It also affords the opportunity to introduce a theory of spiritual development proposed by Christian psychologists that more aptly captures the interactive influence between individuals and the community contained in Pauline discipleship ideals. His multidimensional approach confirms the perspective that healthy family relationships empower spiritual growth for family members and their capabilities to reach outside the family in order to touch lives in a positive way.

Pastors and theologians are not the only people interested in spirituality. Christian psychologists receive many referrals from pastors who feel inadequate to address mental

health issues. Through their struggle to accept the role of both counselor and spiritual mentor, Christian psychologists and sociologists have developed many insights into spiritual development (Mangis 260; Hall 67; Sandage and Shults 263). Their human development theories usually compose the foundations for theories of spiritual development.

In America, the better known human development theories correlate phases of human development with physical development of the brain. Timothy S. Gibson explains the theories of Lawrence Kohlberg through a three-level theory of moral understanding as the basis for human motivations (295). Kohlberg observed that children in early life, when abstract reasoning is limited, recognize external rules imposed by authority. Children want to avoid negative consequences and gain positive rewards. As older children, adolescents, and young adults develop greater awareness, they desire recognition and security. Their brains have developed to such an extent that they are compelled to attain the status of being a good person and attempt to maintain social authority so their status will not be threatened. Adults combine higher-level thinking with experience to develop personal value systems. Some people progress to internal motivations that desire the betterment of society based on personal convictions (Gibson 296). Kohlberg's theory bases human development almost exclusively on cognitive capabilities.

Based on Kohlberg, Gibson proposes four levels of Christian spiritual development (298). His adaptation progresses Kohlberg's developmental levels from capacities for reasoning into acknowledgment of moral authority. The stages of spiritual

development used in the REVEAL study correlate closely with Gibson's moral authority levels as demonstrated in Table 2.1.

A valuable insight gained from Gibson, also reflected in the REVEAL study, proclaims that mature Christianity recognizes the need to deny or overrule human sinful nature in order to recognize God as the center of reality and the source of human justice. Psychologists label such stages as decisionist or enlightened. Each stage builds upon the understanding of the previous stage and adds new or broadened cognitive meaning to the concept of relationship with God (Leffel, Fritz, and Stephens 293). Such categories demonstrate an important concept of growth but limit it to the arena of mental or moral reasoning. It only addresses a portion of the biblical processes previously discussed.

Table 2.1. Comparison of Gibson and REVEAL Moral Authority Development

Gibson's Levels	Reveal Stages	Source of Authority
Accommodation to God's Law	Exploring Christ	Self-centered
Imitation of godly exemplars	Growing in Christ	Other centered
Commitment to Christian worldview	Close to Christ	Principle centered
Kingdom centered	Christ centered	Kingdom centered

Other theories take different approaches. Erik Erikson, for example, proposes stages of virtue development. Mental capacity still must precede or parallel personal development, but he broadened human reality into volitional responses to external stimuli. Each stage consists of a crisis that, if resolved through proper socialization and changes in sense of self (Kiesling), results in the acquisition of a specific virtue. Erikson did not attribute spiritual values to the virtues, yet the crises implicate areas of sin and

self-orientation to overcome within the human soul and the virtues form a list not unlike the fruit of the Holy Spirit. A fully successful life results in what Erikson describes as wisdom. Growth in awareness and motivation maintain central roles, but his theory also expresses more complex interactions between physical capability and social prowess through which personal identity develops. Erikson restructures personal development as character building (Dunkel and Sefcek 13-14). Among the more famous faith development theorists, James W. Fowler builds his ideas upon the theories of Kohlberg with further insight from Erikson along with the life-stage concepts of Daniel Levinson and Carol Gilligan (14-35). He projects the development of faith through a lens of ultimate concern, or ultimate environment, moving from a simplistic ability to trust other people through the ability to embrace paradox to a form of faith that attempts to see the “ultimate environment” of reality as creation from the view of the Creator and tries to love as God loves (37-57). He adapts the developmental theories to Christianity with the concept of vocation. Fowler contrasts the main understanding of life purpose in American society as self-fulfillment to a biblical view of life’s vocation as intimacy with God and seeing God’s dreams fulfilled (83). He gives the following significant description:

We infer that by personal initiative we can shape our own stories, but in so doing, we impact the stories of others. We live on a stage we did not design in a role we did not script. We see ourselves as the main character, but each other character sees themselves as the main character. (111-12)

Erikson and Fowler add important and relevant textures to spiritual development theory. The theories discussed so far demonstrate the human need for dynamic interactions between biological development and social formation but consider internal valuations as the basis or most significant determinate of development (Leffel, “Emotion Part 3” 299). As demonstrated by the parallels between Gibson’s and the REVEAL study, these

theories parallel the understanding of spiritual formation most generally taught in the American church.

A breakthrough in the search for a holistic psychology of spiritual development came from an unexpected source: Suspected of being communist propaganda, the writings of Lev Vygotsky, who lived early in the 1900s in Russia, had been ignored. His theories of development greatly contrast with those from the Western world. Similar to Erikson and Fowler, Vygotsky theorizes that human development requires biological potential but is dependent upon social interaction. Whereas Erikson was concerned with individuals forming their identity within society, Vygotsky focuses his observations more on the effects of external stimuli than on internal valuations. His foundational concept that cognitive formation is dependent upon the social context helps delineate his ideas from those just considered. The degree to which Vygotsky's findings correlate with scientific study became stark reality as a horrified world viewed the state of deprived children from Eastern block and third world orphanages in the 1990s mass media. Romanian orphans who were left without human caretakers for long stretches of time, if they did not die, physically and mentally stopped developing (O'Connor and Rutter 386-87). Humans cannot survive long without relationships. Human beings are social beings and their development is dependent upon relationships (Estep 145). Vygotsky enriched human development theory by emphasizing the bidirectional influences between individuals and society.

Whatever human beings learn, whether it be language, compassion, social rules, or engineering, they grow by "appropriating to oneself the socio-cultural context in which one interacts" (Estep 147). Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (McLeod)

proposes the factor mostly determining how close learners come to reaching their potential depends upon their teachers. How much and how fast a person learns depends upon the innate potential of the person, the motivation and willingness to learn of the person, and the person's internal environment such as health and restedness. Learners also advance according to the attention, skill, and competence of their teachers. What individuals learn depends on what they are taught, the skill with which it is taught, and how adept their teachers are at demonstrating the skill. The values teachers place upon skills in their own lives transmit a value system and social context as well as knowledge and skills. If this theory is correct, the biblical concepts of encouraging one another in Christian community may be absolutely essential to discipleship. People develop abilities to step beyond self-oriented behaviors in pursuit of God's will more by copying a model than by agreement with cognitive teaching. For example, Jesus taught his disciples by living with them and by dying on the cross in front of them. As a result of following their teacher's role model, most of them died a martyr's death. Role models and the social environment may be more important for discipleship than Sunday sermons.

Spiritual formation is "faith mediated by individuals" (Estep 161). Development of the motivation to learn, grow, and change occurs "in the context of emotionally significant relationships" (Hall 68). Willow Creek's REVEAL study gives a powerful demonstration of this principle. The seeker-sensitive movement endeavors to create an environment in which seekers are comfortable. As a result, many conversions happen because seekers are willing to participate. However, an uncommitted seeker could be threatened by an environment that emphasizes relationships in which the people of God vulnerably make confession and encourage one another to new depths of sacrificial

behavior. This contradiction of concerns makes the development of relational discipleship difficult to accomplish within a seeker sensitive environment. People copy how their teachers, pastors, parents, and peers handle life. The ways that people in the community approach social and economic crisis, relationships, money, outreach, and sacrificial dedication to God override conflicting teachings (Estep 162). The REVEAL study interpreted through the lens of Vygotsky's theory indicates that the maturity people in American congregations can expect to achieve depends significantly upon the level of maturity with which they find modeled through firsthand experience within their surrounding Christian community.

If firsthand experience of mature role models enhances personal growth toward maturity, great potential for effective discipleship lies within the most significant relationships, those of the home or family system (Thompson 21-23). The relationship between man and woman, whether married, remarried, or cohabiting, forms the center of most family systems. Fostering zealously healthy marriages based upon transformation in the image of God could be among the most important discipleship programs the church can implement to facilitate the five components of spiritual formation. The next greatest factor is almost certainly the parent-child relationship (or grandparent, guardian, or caretakers of children and youth) that generates the entire holistic, psychosocial-spiritual developmental potential of entire generations. The theories of Erikson and Vygotsky suggest that wise teachers and role models have great influence on the maturation of next generations. Fowler's theory suggests that the pattern of faith formed by children and youth largely matches the faith of their home environment. Developmental theorists imply, each from a different perspective, that significant factors in spiritual growth flow

back and forth between community and individual through the family and other social systems.

Recognizing the bidirectional flow of influence between individual and social dynamics, several Christian psychologists present a complex theory of individual spiritual development that at least approaches the components of Pauline spiritual formation processes (Leffel, “Emotion Part 1” 264). They start from the perspective of psychological growth viewed as “progressive restoration of personality to the image of God” (“Emotion Part 2” 285). As relational beings in the image of God, they believe the “processes that govern” relationship with God, with other people, and with self-identity are one and the same (284). They construct a complex, multilayered model of spirituality including

1. growth of mental concepts,
2. emotional fortitude,
3. contentment regardless of circumstances,
4. the construction of virtue (purity and wisdom),
5. diminishment of vice (understanding self in Christ, right thinking, healing fear, and overcoming sin), and
6. facilitation of an integrated identity (shalom, peace, and holiness, not double-mindedness; 293).

This Christian construction of psychology, called *relational spirituality*, attempts to integrate biblical thought, both stage and continuum-oriented developmental theories, and insights gained from more physiologically based neural sciences similar to the way that

theologians over the centuries have attempted to integrate substantive, functional, and relational views of the image of God.

The central issue within relational spirituality lies in a *duplicitous heart*. It holds the dedicated Christian, a person of pure heart, in contrast to the double-minded person, a person of instability or impure heart. Biblical authors use the term double-minded in ways foreign to American thinking. The biblical concept of doubt consists of fear that results in a lack of total commitment. It is the mind-set of a person who travels one course while looking back over the shoulder contemplating the possibilities had a different journey been chosen or something untethered blown about by the wind (Eph. 4:14; Jas. 1:6-8). Single-minded, focused, or faith-filled Christianity begins with a willful choice to accept God's call to discipleship and traverses many encounters against emotional resistance, peer pressure, physical desire, and mental anguish in order to remain faithful to that call. Susan R. Garrett documents spiritual maturity among the disciples walking alongside Jesus within the gospel of Mark. They had no concept where their path was leading, no accurate and realistic concept at least, when they chose to follow Jesus, yet they followed him to their deaths. They may not have known what they were doing, but once empowered by the Holy Spirit they were not double-minded (396). Conceptualized as choosing a path and enduring to the end of the road, mature faith expectantly anticipates God's provision in all circumstances, though not always the provision originally expected.

This concept of transformation within relational spirituality moves the soul from double-mindedness to willful obedience. It is more complex than simple, unidirectional movement first appears. It requires more than developing a virtue or choosing between

cognitive constructs. People afflicted with deficient resources need God's healing grace in order to display compassionate love (Leffel, "Emotion Part 3" 305-08).

Transformation demands subtracting an obstruction and replacing it with momentum ("Emotion Part 2" 293). Faith flows from the person who integrates motives, emotions, expectations, and personal convictions into behaviors built on trusting the goodness of God. In the tradition of Wesley's moral affections, heart level tendencies to "perceive, experience, and move towards others" emanate from "capacities of character that incline persons towards attitudes and actions of mature relationality" (301-02). Upon encountering a contradiction between beliefs and reality or pierced by previously unknown anxieties after witnessing others' needs, neural schema are challenged. Existing networks of mental and emotional responses experience dissonance. Contradictions create internal conflict, giving opportunity for the person to accept God's grace. Removing obstacles generates a loss over which people must be allowed to mourn within a safe environment for healing (Sandage and Shults 267). As a result of these *transforming moments*, new neural schema are engineered through comparative processing. People ponder internal conflict within several different environments and among a variety of different relationships. In the form of a constructive act of imagination, resolution potentially brings reinterpretation of the past, present, and future, opening people to new ways of behaving (Loder and Fowler 141). Relying upon and reinterpreting past experiences, they create broadened motives and capacities for demonstrating love labeled *moral affective capacities* (Leffel, "Emotion Part 3" 308-11; Greggo 155-58).

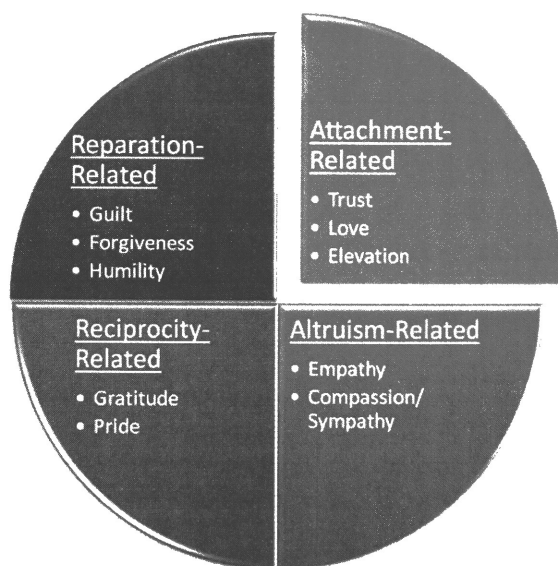
Rebuilding a marital relationship after unfaithfulness would be an extreme illustration of moral affective capacity relevant to marriage. Along with experiencing mistrust, the wounded spouse often feels deep rejection and shame as well as a desire for revenge. However, if the offending spouse demonstrates repentance and the wounded spouse chooses to maintain the marriage, the wounded spouse must proceed with enough wisdom and care to repair the relationship. The virtue of wise reparation requires the actual ability to demonstrate the caring qualities of forgiveness, guilt, and humility.

To this point, psychologists describing relational spirituality include ten moral affective capacities (MAC), which they conjecture function together in processing groups to produce four basic moral virtues:

The four motives consistently linked to the concept of caring include: *attachment*, the motive and capacity to bond and regulate subjective closeness, *altruism*, the motive and capacity to help and regulate the perceived well-being of the other, *reciprocity*, the motive and capacity to mutuality and regulate fairness of exchange, and *reparation*, the motive and capacity to repair and regulate continuity of exchange. (original emphasis; Leffel, Fritz, and Stephens 2006)

MACs of guilt, forgiveness, and humility link to produce reparation. Trust, love, and elevation promote attachment. Reciprocity relates to gratitude and positive pride.

Empathy and compassion/sympathy function as the MACs related to altruism (see Figure 2.1). When people develop a moral virtue, they not only *care about* the one whom they *care for*, they actually *take care of* the strengths development of the other person. When all is settled, a purer heart remains focused toward and capable of acting upon the compassionate will of God toward others.



Source: Leffel, Fritz, and Stephens 206.

Figure 2.1. Moral affective capacities related to moral motives.

Though relational spirituality does not claim this theory of spiritual development is completely accurate, as it is proposed, the theory suggests a means by which both psychologists and theologians might probe more deeply and accurately the multidimensional being of humans created in the image of God. This complex heart-level analysis needs to complement, not replace, more cognitive analyses such as REVEAL. Teaching and preaching of Scripture is a component of Pauline spiritual formation that cannot be abandoned, yet such teaching is only one component. The proposal of relational spirituality promotes the need not only for high quality teaching but also for teaching within a safe environment that encourages interactive questioning and confession.

It also requires leadership role models whose personal lifestyles challenge others to grow. The most significant relationships in life hold the most potential for influence.

The most significant role models for new believers may be pastoral staff, but as time passes, lower-level ministry providers and peers with whom believers process and attempt to live out their faith in daily life have greater impact. People encounter both the greatest challenges and the most consistent opportunities to exhibit faith and love in their primary family systems. Family remains the most powerful catalyst for and the greatest barrier to holistic psycho-spiritual development.

In summary, true transformation not only discovers God's love, it *lives out* the height, width, and depth of God's love. It resides in every fiber of one's being (Simcox 398). It walks faithfully beside others in every struggle and celebration of life. Moral affective capacities are much more than cognitive constructs. They are only recognized as affects when tested over time and proven to motivate people to action. Caring is not a feeling. It entails "actual relatedness" of investing both emotionally and physically in the "strength development" of others (Leffel, "Emotion Part 2" 294). Transformation in Christ unsteadily progresses and digresses through richly textured processes of interaction between deep-seated motives attached to personal identity, significant relationships of the past and present, and cognitive enlightenment, all deftly inspired by the touch of God's grace. In the end, mature spirituality can only be identified as "creative compassion" (Fox 736). It enlivens the individual to search God for forgiveness, love, friendship, and truth and then looks outward toward other people with passion and empathy. Individual spirituality involves cognitive belief systems, but in order to become affective, it must also encompass relational dynamics, emotional maturity, personal integrity, consistency through life phases and submissive conversations with God at the soul level (Estep 160). To progress toward spiritual

maturity, people must acquire the capacity to care. Sometimes the capacity to care develops out of direct encounters with the presence of God. Usually, people acquire the capacity to care through following the lead of others (Greggo 158). Marital relationships and family systems provide the most powerful, consistent, and influential relationships through which moral affective capacities develop and through which spiritual understanding launches self-giving actions.

Spiritual Formation of the Community

In pursuit of a New Testament moral ethic, Richard B. Hays produces a penetrating and challenging synopsis of discipleship through the church. From his perspective, congregational discipleship means taking one's place in the prophetic script of God's people. Stories about local congregations should be the narrative of God's kingdom that joins the early Church to the eternal bride of Christ (469). Three ongoing themes through which local congregations enter the narrative of God's kingdom are community, cross, and new creation.

A group of Christ followers who choose to work out their commitment to God in relationship with one another create community. Such community is the vehicle through which God brings his healing transformation into the world. Though Paul started churches in order to build disciples, Hays observes that Paul transferred the actual responsibility of building those disciples back to the local community. The congregation must accept the assignment if they are to build up one another: "Thus the purpose of corporate worship becomes community formation. It is crucial, however, that the work of community-building be a shared, participatory enterprise" (35). No reading of the Bible is adequate unless what has been read becomes lived. When challenged by biblical insight,

seeking God's will by asking, "What should I do?" yields less depth of understanding than responding from a community viewpoint by asking, "What should we do?" (197). The shared enterprise of community formation, foreign to most American thinking, happens as the local community of believers form a corporate identity as the people of God.

Continuing the story of the cross as a community narrates the incarnation of God to today's world. Godly love requires sacrifice, transformation, growth, integrity, and the power of hope. The cross embodies all that and more. The concept of dying to self consistently turns up within the framework of individual spiritual formation. Faithfulness and obedience to God by a community of believers is a concept rarely heard in American teachings except during stewardship campaigns. Maturation as a community can only be accomplished as the community grapples to identify with Jesus by embodying his cross within their community.

The home appears as a microcosm of the church, a little church. Attempting to describe mutual submission in marriage, one of the truest expressions of Christian community in Ephesians, Paul seems incapable of separating that image from Jesus on the cross dying for his people. Building up of the wife by the husband demands the husband put aside all domination in order to "give himself up" for his wife, an insinuation of the cross. Indeed, unless the husband and wife attain unity, the entire family is hindered from expressions of sacrificial giving within and without the community. The cross must be embodied by couple-saints (Thomas 268) to the point they are willing to change lifestyles and priorities in order to look ably outward and give of themselves as a family unit. Only to the degree that married couples unite in total devotion to each other

and to God can a community begin to embrace the cross, build up one another, and reach out to the world. Within the theme of the cross, families have potential to become little copies of the Trinity whose love overflows to all people.

The image of the cross cannot be separated from the power and hope of the new creation. The same power of the Holy Spirit that resurrected Jesus from death empowers transformation in the theme of new creation. Sacrifice without hope has no power to transform. Dying to self and giving of self portray the story and image of Christ in the community only to the extent they provide opportunity for new life. Working out these images is a means by which the community forges unity and maturity. Similar to individual spiritual formation processes, the church experiences resurrection power only in part, more as walking toward wholeness than permeated by the fullness of healing. The Holy Spirit imparts transformation upon his people as they endeavor together to find unity (Acts 15:28). The theme of new creation exhibits the power of grace working through community.

The theme of new creation especially applies to marriage. In the subtitle of his book on Christian marriage, Gary L. Thomas portrays the relevance of this thought: “What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?” (13). The church should proclaim permanent intimacy of marriage not as an ideal but as a transformative reality. It must recognize the incompleteness of that transformation such that marriage enhancement and marriage counseling are necessary ministries. When cases of infidelity occur in which divorce should be allowable, however hesitantly, the victims must be more appropriately encouraged, accepted, and loved. Christian marriage holds astounding potency to mature both the marriage partners and the church.

The challenge of wealth, among the great obstacles to enhanced discipleship in America, creates an especially salient example of how joining the narratives of community, cross, and new creation could mature the church and the home (Hays 464). The United States may be the wealthiest nation that has ever inhabited the earth. In light of the comments Jesus made about the difficulty wealthy people have entering the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:23), such immense wealth should give American Christians as much cause for concern as for celebration. Jesus also related that anyone who does not give up everything they own cannot be a true disciple (Luke 14:33). The Jerusalem church, shortly after Pentecost, shared all their possessions. Grappling as a community with how the people of God continue the biblical narrative about how to handle wealth cannot happen overnight. Finding unity regarding the sharing of possessions would require “imaginative obedience” to rearrange both personal and congregational priorities. Several couples would have to expend significant energy and put themselves at social risk in order to create relationships of trust with other families. Each married couple, in order to join that struggle, would be forced to new levels of unity in their marital relationship and in their commitment to Christ. As a couple, they would have to agree willingly to sacrifice dreams of upward mobility. Both the home and the church would have to mature into safe and forgiving environments that encourage confession of sin and foster empowering accountability. The people of a local congregation would have to forge new stories for their lives to provide financially for one another. Hays did not hesitate to comment that he had never experienced or known such an ideal community of believers.

To identify truly with Christ, the biblical images of community, cross, and new creation demand believers wrestle together to find wisdom. The combination of wealth with rugged individualism creates a formidable barrier to both personal and community maturation for the church and the family that will only be overcome by intentional, consistent movement toward identification with the themes of community, cross, and new creation. Local American congregations will never effectively reach maturity without challenging and empowering families to reach maturity as couple-saints.

Dynamics of Marital Relationships

Approaching this literature review, I specifically kept the theological perspective of people as God's image bearers separate from the review of marriage dynamics in behavioral science literature in order to display the reciprocal nature of the two. I found behavioral science descriptions of marital relationship dynamics formed a realistic counterpart to theological descriptions of Trinitarian relationships. Five categories for marital dynamics roughly mirror theology. Unity, deference, mutual submission, intimacy, and generativity seem to capture the central themes of the literature.

Formation of unity creates permanence for the marital relationship. *We* and *us* form the basis of couple identity (Stanley, Markman, and Whitton 290; Clulow 292). Within the usual American social system, what begins as a simple common attraction, perhaps a smile in response to a lingering look across the room, proceeds through a specific series of romantic bonding steps that eventually require potential couples to choose or reject commitment to an exclusive relationship (Joy, *Bonding* 456). Commitment offers time for experience to build a third personality. As the partnership develops, dyadic coping mechanisms determine the degree of unity the couple will

obtain. If either one or both of them mock the other, are unwilling to contribute, or show lack of concern for the other or the relationship, little or no trust is built and the partnership remains disjointed. If both partners help with daily tasks and exhibit empathic interest toward each other, healthy dyadic coping creates loyalty to the relationship (Bodenmann, Pihet, and Kayser 486). “We” becomes a “safe haven” within which the couple accelerates personal and relational growth and tests their self-perceptions (Clulow 292). A solidarity of *us* against the world forms. Unity starts to mature in the form of mutual goals, dual processing, dual problem solving, shared responsibilities, and shared resources. Reality becomes a “joint estimation” of united attitudes reinforced by shared communication and common behaviors (Weigel and Ballard-Reisch 225). All other aspects of the marriage depend upon maturation of unity (Knobloch et al. 176).

Deference to the needs and desires of the spouse can surround unity with a protective layer of hope. An immature desire for fairness in the relationship maintains a *social exchange* dynamic in which couples are only willing to give to the point they expect to receive. Confidence in the permanence of the marriage creates a team spirit for which the partners becoming willing to test sacrificial caring (Stanley et al. 290). If both spouses choose an altruistic attitude toward each other, social exchange dynamics break down into true willingness for sacrificial giving and grateful receiving. Deference of personal desires to the needs of the relationship leads to healthier couples functioning, less interference to coordinated endeavors, and deepening of team spirit. Commitment to unity and willingness to sacrifice create a continual loop of engagement to deepen the relationship and emotional bonding (301-02). Trustful unity and deference completely overrule social exchange (Nakonezny and Denton 410).

The type of commitment to the spouse that overrules concern for the equitable exchange of positive benefits in marriage approximates theological covenant. It is a form of self-limitation that refuses to consider other options; whether or not a more satisfying relationship could be built with someone other than the spouse is not a consideration. Over time the limits to consider only the one option of permanence with a spouse makes other options less attractive (Stanley, Markman, and Whitton 673). Limiting self within a permanent commitment to the other and to the relationship creates a safe environment to develop healthy marital relationship dynamics (Stanley et al. 290). The covenant of marriage could be described as self-limiting commitment combined with a determination to realize intimate bonds within human sexuality.

Healthy relational dynamics in psychological literature reflect Trinitarian mutual submission. Early in the relationship, the individuals experience an infatuation of daydreams about the potential beloved. Over time, those embryonic, hope-filled musings have potential to blossom into sacrificial love. *Mindfulness* means to think about the other's point of view and evaluate the best way to relate to the other; it means sensitivity and empathy. The more mindful the couple remains to one another, the greater their marital satisfaction (Burpee and Langer 43). Willingness to sacrifice within a mindful context leads to consistent self-limitation in which relational identity goes beyond "hanging in there through thick and thin" to become genuine mutual submission through acts of self-giving (Stanley et al. 301; Bodenmann, Pihet, and Kayser 486). Partners cannot take each other's contributions for granted (Bodenmann, Pihet, and Kayser 482; Stanley et al. 302). Sacrifice is critical to building trust, but sacrifice must find an appreciative response from the spouse in order to motivate continued giving of self

(Bodenmann, Pihet, and Kayser 492; Stanley et al. 291). The couple obtains mutual submission within the safety net of trust and appreciation that surrounds self-giving.

Many godly attributes describe healthy mutual submission within the literature. Giving of self in empathy includes protecting the other in times of stress and helping him or her find a positive perspective (Graham and Conoley 232). Rather than blaming each other, mature couples look to each other for support (233) without attributing the circumstances to “negative characteristics of the spouse” (Henry et al. 439). Mandatory reciprocity within intimacy reveals a tension between plural and particular in human relationships. Relational maturity cannot exceed individual maturity and individual maturity forms through relationship. Individuals hurt in one relationship find healing only in another relationship. Mutual submission builds emotional skillfulness, the ability to have an emotion and skillfully choose “how to behave while experiencing the emotion” (Cordova, Gee, and Warren 218). Forgiveness is another aspect of self-limitation. It brings resolution and further interdependence (Gordon et al. 9). Relational terms in the psychological literature such as mindfulness, willingness to sacrifice, efforts to appreciate the other, and forgiveness sound reminiscent of mutual submission in Ephesians chapter 5 and love in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 (Bodenmann, Pihet, and Kayser 486).

Intimacy is one of the deepest longings within human existence. It deepens to the extent that unity, deference, and mutual submission mature. The trust built up in secure permanence allows married couples to test the “we-ness” of their relationships via vulnerable sharing of emotions, hopes, and motivations (Bodenmann, Pihet, and Kayser 486). Such tests allow them to develop interactive “social and emotional intelligence” within a “membrane of couple identity” (Clulow 292). Intimacy reinforces unity by

delineating a boundary between the couple and the rest of their environmental reality. Trust further develops over time and intimacy flourishes when self-disclosure is greeted with acceptance rather than judgment or ridicule from the partner (Cordova, Gee, and Warren 220). As long as both partners reciprocate with similar levels of vulnerability and emotional skill, intimacy and trust delve ever deeper (Bagarozzi 286; Cordova, Gee, and Warren 229; Laurenceau, Barrett, and Pietromonaco 1249). Dennis A. Bagarozzi describes multiple dimensions of intimacy: emotional, psychological, intellectual, sexual, spiritual, aesthetic, social-recreational, physical, and *time in each other's presence* (287). Emotional self-disclosure seems to be stronger than intellectual disclosure (Laurenceau, Barrett, and Rovine 322; Cordova, Gee, and Warren 229). Intimacy defined as couple closeness appears to be the most significant indicator of marital satisfaction (Larson and Olson). Intimacy is the hope of human sexuality and the fulfillment of human identity.

Generativity is both a base motivation for a marital union and one of the most mature expressions of marriage. Parenting is the most common form of marital generativity. The drive to birth, love, and raise children can become immense even when the couple involved believes doing so will be extremely challenging and the results risky. Research has consistently demonstrated that the marital relationship dynamics of the parents as well as the health and maturity of each parent considerably influence the well-being of their children. As one example, research indicates that parental conflict correlates to risky behavior for teenagers, especially boys (Baril, Crouter, and McHale 651). The capacity to care for others develops within safe and intimate relationships through which strong relational and emotional skills are acquired. Children inherit their parents' dynamic blueprint for life including value systems, work ethics, religious beliefs,

relational skills, and emotional intelligence (Ben-Ari and Lavee 622; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al. 227). Raising children creates a new generation of potential couple makers and an intergenerational expression of couple identity.

Energized couples have the capacity to express generativity of care for others outside their immediate family. G. Michael Leffel, Malerie E. Fritz and Michelle R. Stephens theorize the development of moral affective capacity within marital relationships. As a couple develops unity and sexual identity, their bonds enhance trust, love, and elevation. As they test the safety of sacrificial caring, they will often fail and then seek reconciliation. In the process, they develop positive guilt, forgiveness, and humility. Successful deference allows for altruistic expressions enabling maturation of empathy and compassionate sympathy. The reciprocity of mutual submission aligns with capacities for gratitude and positive pride, feeling good about doing what is right (206). Couple intimacy must have enough maturity to be a “secure base” of operations in order for the couple to form a social network and contribute beyond the needs of the immediate family (Clulow 292). Couples who give in unity commonly develop the ability to receive support from other families with whom they have community (Graham and Conoley 232). As these capacities are strengthened within an intimate relationship, they theoretically should combine in an “upward spiral,” facilitating the couple toward caring for others outside their immediate family (Leffel, Fritz, and Stephens 213). Healthy marriages are intricately complex and explosively powerful for the development of moral affective capacities.

If moral affective capacity theory is correct, helping couples and families develop healthy relationships and moral affective capacities may be key to creating a church

environment through which families interact to build a mature community. If children learn these skills growing up, they are “likely to grow in later years to an ever widening circle of concern for others in the community and larger world” (Leffel, Fritz, and Stephens 304). The authors of this social intuitionist model conclude that research needs to be undertaken both to test the validity of their model and to investigate the processes by which moral capacities are acquired in religious and therapeutic settings. These conclusions add to the relevance of this project.

Spirituality’s Influence on Marriage

Though spiritually minded couples benefit greatly in marriage, many questions remain. The evidence from both theology and behavioral sciences indicates the associations between spirituality and marriage are complex and intertwined, but psychology research has tended to take a rather simplistic approach to religion (Hall 78). Shallow parameters such as frequency of worship service attendance composed the single factor in analysis of religion for 80 percent of behavioral science studies (Larson and Olson; Marks 604). Rarely has research measured the degree to which couples integrate faith into their cognitive perceptions or relational endeavors (Larson and Olson) or investigated the nature of relationship with God that influences marital relations (Dollahite and Lambert 303). Only recently have researchers considered spirituality from a more proximal psychological scope (Mahoney, Pargament, Jewell, et al. 325), and even those researchers admit their efforts have only scratched the surface with little or no attention to how influences operate (335). With such shallow measures dominating the behavioral sciences literature, they obviously have not uncovered dynamics regarding how actual spiritual transformation relates to marital functioning.

Accepting the shallow measures, behavioral science literature entertains a long history of research on religion and spirituality. Religion or spirituality is among the top five factors that influence long-term success in marriage (Marks 608). A myriad of studies found spirituality to have “positive correlations with marital satisfaction and commitment” (Marks 611; Mahoney, Pargament, Jewell, et al. 328). One large national study found spousal agreement about spirituality the second most influential factor on marital relationship quality, and a significantly high degree of correlation occurs between spiritual agreement and the top rated factor (Larson and Olson; Marks 608). Research findings regarding generally positive relationships between spirituality and marriage enhancement can be grouped into several categories such as cognitive constructs, relational skills, social support, family participation, and perceived (or realized) divine intervention (Dollahite and Lambert 295; Marks 604).

The cognitive constructs promoted by religious associations such as patience, personal integrity, overcoming difficulties, rules about sexual relations, gender roles, self-sacrifice, and conflict resolution positively influence marital relationships (Hill and Pargament 13; Dollahite and Lambert 294, 296; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al. 222). When couples believe God considers marriage important, they attribute greater meaning to fulfilling their marital roles and feel more personally fulfilled (Dollahite and Lambert 296). Religious couples perceive temporary circumstances within a framework of eternal significance and work together with less anxiety and better coping skills (Graham and Conoley 232). Expecting to share life together for eternity, they tend towards a more positive view of the future (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al. 227) and tend to put forth more effort to maintain their relationships (227). Religious

beliefs encourage personal growth and the desire to give of themselves more altruistically (Nakonezny and Denton 410; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al. 224). Religion and spiritual pursuits encourage belief systems that contribute to marital vitality.

Religious and spiritual pursuits promote practically every marital relationship skill that has been found to strengthen couple satisfaction and relationship endurance. Couples with high religious agreement share core value systems (Weigel and Ballard-Reisch 225; Marks 608; Dollahite and Lambert 296). Surveying thousands of respondents using the ENRICH materials, researchers found that 69 percent of the respondents who agreed on spiritual matters were categorized as marriages likely to succeed while only 19 percent of those who had dissimilar beliefs were in those positive categories (Larson and Olson). Spirituality strengthens loyalty in marriage (Dollahite and Lambert 296). Couples participating together in religious pursuits are more enabled to forgive (Dollahite and Lambert 297; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al. 228) and develop better conflict resolution skills (Marks 608; Dollahite and Lambert 297; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al. 228). They exhibit better communication skills (Weigel and Ballard-Reisch 225; Mahoney, Pargament, Jewell, et al. 330) and tend to relate more positive character attributes to one another (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al. 223). Spiritual couples more often willingly make sacrifices for the relationship (Nakonezny and Denton 410; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al. 228) and, when all else fails, willingly seek help (Larson and Olson). Spirituality positively influences marital skill development and marital satisfaction in most cases.

The family receives multiple benefits from participating in religious pursuits. Couples observe good marital role models through the church and children find positive

role models of adulthood (Dollahite and Lambert 297). They receive emotional encouragement, friendship, and sometimes financial assistance through church associations (Graham and Conoley 232), though single mothers and divorcees tend to receive less (Marks 612). Family roles are more clearly delineated than for most nonreligious couples (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al. 227). Many home practices such as prayer together, religious seasons, and ceremonies strengthen affectionate family bonds and family loyalty (Marks 606; Dollahite and Lambert 296). Spiritually minded parents spend more time interacting with their families (Dollahite and Lambert 295), endeavor to show loving concern (Marks 608), and listen more attentively (606). Efforts to pass their faith beliefs to the next generation often create an intergenerational loop of bidirectional communication that lasts into the children's adulthood (Puffer et al. 278-80; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al. 227). The family of a religious couple often benefits from the couple's participation in organized spiritual activities, thus motivating them to empower the couple's marital relationship.

Questions remain regarding what, beyond social interactions and some cognitive differences, links spirituality to the marital relationship. Some researchers even beg the question whether the link actually could be divine intervention (Hill and Pargament 13). Psychological research does not usually attempt to measure direct divine intervention. However, Peter C. Hill and Kenneth I. Pargament observe evidence that the link between marriage and some spiritual dimensions could not be explained via psychological mediation (13; Dollahite and Lambert 295). Many psychologists suggest that couples who describe direct help or guidance from God cannot be ignored (Mahoney, Pargament, Jewell, et al. 328; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, et al. 222; Dollahite and

Lambert 297, 302; Marks 611). A great deal of recent research has begun that will consider in greater detail many of the questions that remain regarding how spiritual transformation affects marital functioning. The greater void, however, and the question to which this project was addressed concerns how marital functioning influences spiritual formation.

Marriage's Influence on Spiritual Transformation

The evidence clearly shows that parents profoundly affect their children's relationships with God, yet research demonstrating family influence on spirituality is not very prevalent. The diversity of relevant factors that have been identified regarding the effects parents have upon their children varies from degrees of argumentation to marital satisfaction. At an early age, the child's perceptions of God correlate with their perceptions of their parents' marriage relationship. If children observe and emotionally sense a happy, loving, caring environment, they usually give God a benevolent association. However, a conflicted, argumentative home dispels children's ideas of a caring creator (Marks 606). Conflict within the marriage also diminishes the children's adult partnership capacities, lowering their potential contributions to the community of faith in adulthood (Clulow 292). Religiously active fathers tend to promote a feeling of closeness to God in their children (Marks 608). The correlations are incomplete and distant, but parental role models and parent-child relationships affect spiritual formation.

Current research regarding the influence marriages have upon spiritual transformation is even more sparse. Statistical reviews indicate that getting married by itself will prompt some couples to affiliate with a religious organization (Wuthnow). Becoming parents may be one of the largest factors that prompts young adults to reassess

their stances on faith (Marks 608). A further issue of concern for the church in regard to these phenomena lies in recent demographic studies. More young Americans are choosing not to get married. Young adults are getting married later and later in life. The percentage of married young adults who remain childless has been increasing. Young adults wait longer to get married and to have children than ever before in America. These categories of unmarried and married without children are less likely than any other demographic categories to remain unattached to any church or religious organization (Wuthnow 55). Beyond observations that delaying marriage and bearing fewer children statistically lowers church attendance, few speculations have been investigated, or even postulated, regarding the influence of marriage upon spiritual transformation.

Research in which marital dynamics are the independent variable and spiritual transformation is the dependent variable is practically nonexistent. The behavioral science researchers most recently involved in finding significant cognizant links between religion and healthy relationships have commented on their dissatisfaction with the state of research on spirituality. “Influences of family dynamics on religious practices have rarely been studied” (Marks 608). In the conclusions to their research studies, social scientists recommend the need for such investigation:

Although the theory and discussion in this study have focused on the impact of religion on marriage, the correlational results are bidirectional in nature. Additional theory and research is needed to elucidate ways in which marriage may facilitate or impede religiousness and spirituality. (Mahoney, Pargament, Jewell, et al. 335)

The question then remains for further study as to how people “develop eyes with a sacred lens” (Pargament and Mahoney 193). As a response to this gap in research literature, the direct object of this study was to ascertain information about whether, how, and why the

quality and functioning of the marital relationship impacts spiritual development and transformation.

Research Design

This was an exploratory qualitative research study (Frankel and Devers 254; Ladner) that attempted to explore (Creswell 53) both existing theories of discipleship processes and moral affective capacity development that would inform further study of marital relationship enhancement as a means of improving discipleship processes through family systems. I designed semi-structured interviews to investigate the types of changes that had occurred in the couples' marital relationships, to what causes the couple attributed those changes, how the couples' relationships with God had changed, how their participation in church programs had changed, whether any changes had occurred in their desire to help other people experience God's loving grace, and the reasons to which they attributed any and all of these changes.

Summary

Theology that is applied, that has been proven to shape daily life such that godliness follows, is right theology (Stevens 245). When theology is not checked by life, or does not apply to life, theology becomes inflexible and lifeless. A missional church intent on maturation and evangelism "must contain procedures that call for the biblical and theological assessment of its structures and provide for ways to alter them" (Guder 231). Proper theology holds both leaders and congregants accountable to biblical transformation in the image of Christ. A truly functional and biblical definition of maturity is obtained when church leaders maintain close enough relations with their people to judge ably whether the daily lives of their people exhibit growth toward the

imago Dei. The parameters of evaluation need to identify how church ministries facilitate Paul's five components of the discipleship process. Christian maturity, both individual and congregational, is consistently viewed in the Bible through the lens of humanity as God's image bearers. That image is most clear in marital relationships. Marriage functions to facilitate growth toward maturity in all phases of life. Any local congregation that desires to evaluate daily life godliness of the congregation must pay close attention to the reflection of Trinitarian relational characteristics in the marriages of their people.

Looking for the dynamics represented within a rich biblical definition such as Samra's description of Paul's five components of the discipleship process, the American church would do well to create tools and methods by which congregations could evaluate the ongoing impact of each ministry within the church. Informed by human development ideas of relational spirituality and the community narrative suggestions of Hays, understanding the means by which the marital relationship facilitates the complex maturation processes within local congregations will be an essential aspect of creating such tools. The first and foremost purpose for this project was to uncover some of the basic means by which marital relationships are a facilitating factor in discipleship that leads toward spiritual growth.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Problem and Purpose

Studies, such as REVEAL, demonstrate that the expansive efforts made toward discipleship by the American church in recent decades have not produced the desired substantive results. Better understanding of the processes and mechanisms involved in transformational discipleship, especially those that are most relevant to overcoming Western individualism in order to facilitate community formation, should help inform church leaders in their efforts to create more effective discipleship programs. The project focused upon the influence of marital relationships. Based on Trinitarian theology and descriptions of community-based discipleship processes mediated through family systems as suggested in Pauline epistles, the project investigated in what ways enhancing the marital relationship influenced the spiritual growth process of married couples at West Ridge Church of Dallas, Georgia, and whether positive marital change enabled more consistent development of moral affective capacity by those couples.

One additional goal of this project was to create an evaluative data collection method that future research studies could easily adapt to congregational-level evaluative methods. The project intentionally designed a simplistic method of data collection that local church constituents could perform in order to evaluate the effects of congregational discipleship programs. Meeting the expectation of peer reviewed research required the level of data analysis used for this study to go beyond the resources church leadership would normally expend, yet, potential exists for further refinement of the data collection methods to produce effective evaluation tools for congregational use.

Hypothesis

This project was built upon the hypothesis that enhancing marital relationships helps build caring family relational systems upon which the church can grow a more mature community of believers.

Research Questions

Four research questions guided the investigation for this project.

Research Question #1

What positive marital changes were reported by the participating couples?

Many churches, including West Ridge Church, expend significant resources on marriage enhancement programs. Any information that helps identify the types of changes actually occurring after such interventions could be valuable to churches. Marital changes may include enhancement of feelings, changes in behavior that reflect a clearer image of the triune God, changes that demonstrate behavior more closely aligned to those found by social science research as positive factors, increased commitment, changes in types of commitment toward the definition of marriage given in this paper, or any other aspect of the marriage or marital relationship participating couples report as a positive change. Though many aspects of marriage and marital relationships are described in the review of the literature, the interviews were open to hear new or novel ideas from participants regarding what they considered positive changes in their relationships. The possibility exists that for conflicted couples, behavior usually considered as a negative might be deemed a positive if it is less destructive than previous behaviors. All such possibilities could operate as potential categories upon which to build a thematic structure

to interpret the results of this project. In the interview questions found in Appendix A, the marital changes cluster was designed to answer this research question.

Research Question #2

What spiritual growth was reported by the participating couples as having occurred after positive marital change?

As directly indicated in 1 Peter 3:7, removing inappropriate behavior from marital relationships has the potential positively to affect relationships with God. Spiritual growth, as defined for this project, identifies daily life changes toward more excellent relationships as understood in light of relational or Trinitarian theology. The project aimed to identify spiritual growth as an indicator of effective discipleship that results in greater Christian maturity for each individual and the participating couples' families. Found in Appendix A, the interview questions designated as the spiritual growth cluster, along with questions 2 and 4 of the further probes cluster, were designed to answer this research question.

Research Question #3

What growth in moral affective capacity was reported by the participating couples as having occurred after positive marital changes?

Good intentions do not always bring good results. As indicated by the REVEAL study, Christian believers with the most advanced desires to make obedience to Christ the center of their lives often do not turn those desires into actions to touch the lives of people beyond their personal spheres of intimacy (Hawkins and Parkinson 106). This question builds upon the psychological theories of G. Michael Leffel that the capacity to turn such good intentions into actions are formed through processing moments of internal

dissonance within intimate relationships (Leffel, Fritz, and Stephens). The interview questions designated as the moral affective capacity cluster, and questions 1 and 3 of the further probes cluster were designed to answer this research question.

Research Question #4

How are spiritual growth and moral affective capacity affected by positive marital change?

The core concern of this project emanated from concerns that a crisis of discipleship is occurring in the American church, which has almost nullified attempts to pass a vital faith to next generations. Mentoring relationships through both the family and the community of believers appear to be failing or nonexistent. With the extent of resources regularly given toward marriage enhancement, any information that would indicate why, when, and how such programs affect discipleship of parents should help church leaders more effectively bring spiritual growth to participants and the family systems around them.

The project rests on the theory that family relationships reinforce or disturb the bidirectional influence of spiritual formation processes in the church, between individuals and community relationships. The hypothesis was obtained through reading both Scripture and social science research. I found no research literature that directly measured, evaluated, or investigated this relationship. Any information this project provided to answer this research question helped to fill an existing gap in knowledge. The interview questions in Appendix A designated questions 3a and 4c of the spiritual growth cluster, questions 1ai and 2a of the moral affective capacity cluster, and questions 4, 5, and 6 of the further probes cluster were designed to answer this research question. Along

with those specific questions, any patterns or themes of change that occurred among the couples were considered in order to answer this research question.

Population and Participants

Participants in the research project were married, evangelical Christian couples who attended West Ridge Church in Dallas, Georgia. Each couple had experienced some form of positive marital relationship changes previous to the research project. They self-volunteered to participate in this research project by responding to a flyer or presentation within a small group context. Members of the West Ridge Church leadership gave contact information of small group leaders to me in order to arrange the small group presentations. The flier that was handed out during those meetings is found in Appendix C. The flier offered an incentive of a \$25 gift card to a local restaurant for participation. In order to participate, couples responded to the presentation by phone or e-mail. I then followed up those contacts with an inquiry during which I required self-affirmation that both spouses agreed that their marital relationship of the couple had indeed improved. Eighteen couples responded to the presentation. Seventeen of them met the parameters of recognizable marital relationship change and participated in this project. Three more couples were referred by other couples. All three of them met the parameters and participated. One of the referred couples did not attend West Ridge Church but did attend a similar church in a nearby community. A total of twenty couples participated in the semi-structured interviews.

Design of the Study

This project was an exploratory qualitative study. Solitary investigators on low budgets, studying human behavior and habits (Shuttleworth), that are in the earlier phases

of research on a complex topic upon which little literature exists (Creswell 53), in order “to gain a total or complete picture” (Key), begin with an exploratory qualitative study consisting of in-depth interviewing (Frankel and Devers 254; Ladner). The doctoral program for which this study was developed is concerned with research that advances Christian ministry in the field. As discussed in the research literature review, discipleship processes are very complex. Direct analysis of Samra’s interpretation for Paul’s discipleship processes would require several complex research efforts. In-depth research designs, such as would be needed to analyze the bidirectional processes of discipleship, would require large samples and strict measures that could create high degrees of internal validity, external validity, and reliability. The academic community needs such large studies to promote greater understanding of spiritual formation discipleship theories. I designed this study as a simplistic method of qualitative evaluation in hopes of gathering insights to inform the development of further research studies and to investigate the possibility of developing qualitative discipleship evaluation tools for use in local congregations. Qualitative research methodology also has the advantage of gaining insights to the means and mechanisms by which processes operate in the daily relational lives of people by comparing the experiences of several people (Creswell 49). This study used a semi-structured interview format to record narrative experiences in the family systems of couples with enhanced marital relationships in order methodically to capture thematically common processes. As themes were recognized, they were compared with the biblical and social science insights gathered in the reviews of this chapter. These comparisons were used to project areas of programmatic ministry that aided or hindered individual and community maturation.

Instrumentation

The researcher-designed, semi-structured interviews investigated the types of changes that had occurred in the couples' marital relationships, to what causes the couple attributed those changes, how the couples' relationships with God had changed, how their participation in church programs had changed, whether any changes had occurred in their desire to help other people experience God's loving grace, and the reasons to which they attributed any and all of these changes.

Reliability and Validity

As a qualitative study without quantitative data, validity could not be obtained through statistical procedures. The interpretation of the results depended upon corroboration among the experiences of several couples. Such corroboration consisted of comparative development of categories and themes that arose within the data itself. Validity of the results and conclusions depended upon expert opinion to compare their interpretations to the theoretical foundations upon which this project was built. I was not concerned with creating new or universal ideas of spiritual formation. Rather, the project aimed to develop means by which programmatic efforts of local churches might be evaluated in comparison to biblical ideals of personal and community maturation. The reliability of the results is dependent upon further research repeating this study in another context or confirming the results through related exercises. I attempted to give all information needed that other research studies could attempt to replicate this project.

Data Collection

I contacted the couples chosen to participate by phone and scheduled to meet with them. Semi-structured interviews of the twenty participating couples took an average of

approximately sixty-five minutes per couple with a range of fifty minutes to ninety minutes (see Appendix A). Each couple was given a choice to meet at church facilities, their home, or a public location in order for their convenience and for them to feel comfortable with the personal line of questioning involved. All three options were chosen with about half of the couples choosing to meet in their own homes. Each interview was recorded with two audio recording devices and then transcribed into written transcripts. During interview sessions, I attempted to focus as much as possible upon the couple, giving them full attention and social support in order to help them relate stories of importance to their marriages and families. I occasionally helped redirect their responses to those relevant to the study, asked for clarification in order to obtain greater detail, and used personal comments to interject potential thematic topics into the interview transcripts. I felt such personal commentary would be less intrusive to the interviews than taking written notes.

Data Analysis

During the initial reading of the transcripts, and somewhat during the actual typing, I attempted to break down each interview into topical sections. A second reading resulted in the creation of several topical categories that were coded into relevant transcript sections. John W. Creswell describes this methodology as a coding process by which to reduce overlap and “collapse codes into themes” (266). Juliet M. Corbin and Anselm L. Strauss, though describing more advanced research by which to develop grounded theories, relate similar methodologies as conceptual ordering (53) and the conceptualizing process (98). Subsequent readings compared the categories to the foundational scriptural and psychological theories and reduced the categories to six

themes through which results were reported. Dr. Chris Kiesling, my seminary dissertation mentor, reviewed the thematic level of data results for consistency. Finally, a three-person dissertation committee reviewed the results and conclusions in order to give expert opinion validation.

Ethical Procedures

Before approval by the leadership team of West Ridge Church was granted, I assured the team that all interviews would remain confidential and interview information protected from public exposure. The participants in the dissertation project were informed of the confidentiality of the interviews in the original small group presentations. All participants in the project were given a form of confidentiality that explained the goals of the project and stated how their identities would be protected. All interview data was coded with the first two numbers of the street address of the family residence, the first initial of the participants' mothers' maiden names, and days of the month the husband and wife were born. The gender of the speaker further delineated individual commentary in each transcript. These codes were used throughout data analysis rather than personal names. The original recordings were kept under lock and key in a fire safe enclosure and analytical data were maintained on a portable USB drive that could not be accessed through the Internet. All narratives in the published report used fictitious names and any personally identifiable data removed such that none of the persons involved could be identified. The overall results of the research were publicly published, but no data that could identify any specific interviewing family was released. Final data was saved on two portable drives and stored under lock and key.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Problem and Purpose

The needs for more effective discipleship processes and the efficient evaluation of discipleship programs motivated the design of this project. Recent studies, such as REVEAL, demonstrate that the expansive efforts made toward discipleship by the American church in recent decades have not produced the desired substantive results. Better understanding of the processes and mechanisms involved in transformational discipleship, especially those that are most relevant to overcoming Western individualism in order to facilitate community formation, should help inform church leaders in their efforts to create more effective discipleship programs. Based on Trinitarian theology and descriptions of community-based discipleship processes mediated through family systems in the Pauline epistles, the project investigated in what ways enhancing marital relationships influenced the spiritual growth process of married couples at West Ridge Church of Dallas, Georgia, and whether positive marital change enabled more consistent development of moral affective capacity. A secondary goal of this project was to create an evaluative data collection method that future research studies could easily adapt to narrative style, congregational level, evaluation methods. The project intentionally used a simplistic method of data collection that could be accomplished at the local church level in order to evaluate the impact of congregational discipleship programs, thought the data analysis level used for this study goes beyond the resources church leadership would normally expend on program evaluation.

Participants

Participants in the research project were married evangelical Christian couples who attended West Ridge Church in Dallas, Georgia. Each couple had experienced some form of marital relationship improvement prior to the research project. Nineteen couples that met the research parameters chose to participate. One additional couple that attended a similar church in a nearby community was referred to the interviewer and chose to participate.

Research Question #1

What positive marital changes were reported by the participating couples?

Early on, I expected to present a comprehensive list of the changes that couples described in their marital relationships. The following list gives only a portion of the terms used to describes changes by the first two couples, neither of which fit into the category of couples with the most significant relationship changes: more open, more willing to consult with each other, more at ease, trusting, more accepting, becoming husband's cheerleader, more admiring, more respectful, thinking of each other during the day, sharing chores, more relational, more intimate, amazed with one another, comfortable, happy, valued, more truthful, more forgiving, more responsible, gentleness, vulnerable, joyful, merciful, compassionate, feeling loved, patient, connected at the heart, mutually sacrificial, dedicated together, feeling safe, more encouraging, more cooperative, becoming a great journey, becoming companions, doing life together, enjoying time together, openly honest, and becoming more of a team. I recognized that a comprehensive list of the marital changes described by all of the couples would be voluminous, impractical, and unhelpful.

In order to recognize factors important to this study, rather than attempt to create an exhaustive list of the words used by the couples, I compared the interviews from several perspectives in hopes of finding repetitive themes. Two topics appeared often enough to mention separately. Almost every couple interviewed described enhanced communication skills and increased appreciation for the differences between one another's needs. Though consistently observed, I did not find these two topics helpful in differentiating factors important to this study.

The following paragraphs describe several observations that categorize the couples into groups helpful for this project, but the first observation I would like to share is the sheer exuberance expressed by couples. Of all the couples, the couple that exhibited the least enthusiasm was a couple whose youngest child had recently gone to college. They described their marital changes simply as more "time to appreciate each other" since the children had grown up. Even such a little change fostered noteworthy enthusiasm. The wife commented regarding a man who came to a small group meeting at their home. The man had tried such meetings before and, in several attempts, never had a positive small group experience. "The man told me as soon as he stepped in the door of our home that he knew he could do this." He had a positive experience and shared with other people. "That is the kind of environment we can create together," she stated with relish. The enthusiasm expressed by other couples demonstrated exceptional gratitude. A husband who had been involved in immoral behavior for which he now expresses shame shared his thoughts:

The whole time you were trying to explain the confidentiality thing, I was thinking, I don't care about confidentiality because people need to know. I'm not ashamed of what God has done in me and us and our marriage. He

didn't do it just so we could be a happy little family. We can't just keep it to ourselves. God has bigger purposes. This is huge.

The enthusiasm exhibited suggests that positive change in marital relationships produces core changes in the lives of the couples involved, produces positive changes in their entire attitudes toward life, and opens them to greater authenticity in other relationships. Because all of the couples shared noteworthy enthusiasm, this result of positive marital relationship changes makes a noteworthy statement.

The excitement, though universal, was not equally distributed (see Table 4.1). The importance couples associated with positive marital enhancement consistently varied with the degree to which each couple made positive strides toward unity. As delineated in Table 4.1, the most significant theme I found by which to categorize the marital changes experienced by the couples related to redefining the goal of marital relationships toward committed, other-oriented, self-giving love. The couples with the greatest relationship changes functioned as a united entity in ways they had not previously functioned. In essence, they redefined their understanding of marriage. Along with the change in type of commitment, only those couples that developed the skills needed to express that commitment adequately and faithfully over a period of time gained enough trust in one another to create a couple unit that effectively functions as a team in daily life.

The variation of enthusiasm expressed by the couples consistently related to the degree of movement toward a clearer reflection of Trinitarian unity resulting in the experience of joy in the image of perichoresis. Couples used the term *team* most often in conjunction with this aspect of unity or coupleness. Of the eleven couples that had experienced the greatest changes toward a committed, self-giving, and other-oriented unity, only three did not use the term to describe an important aspect of change. Two of

these three had experienced deep hurt within their marriages and had not yet gained full trust from one another after betrayal. The wife of the third couple effectively described their relationship in terms that more directly estimates unity as image bearer than the word team. “We never had that modeled for us before, even acknowledging or recognizing there was a need for trust and vulnerability, and learning that it is the sweetest representation of the Trinity.” Only four of the nine couples who had experienced less significant relationship change used the term *team*. Two of the four used the term in the context of feeling *more* like a team *again*. A third couple described the blending of several children from previous marriages into a team. The fourth couple, after resolving child-rearing conflict, talked about their abilities to function *more* as a parenting team. None of the nine couples with lesser marital enhancements used the term team to describe a change in their marital identity.

Table 4.1. Categories of Couples

Category	# of couples	Change in relational dynamics	Process	Change in marital satisfaction
Life stage transitions	6	minimal	gradual	increased positive
Skill development	3	significant	choice to seek help followed by building trust	dissatisfaction to satisfaction
Redefinition of marriage	11	all encompassing	crisis or challenge followed by rapid change	from threatened to positive

Of the twenty couples interviewed, six experienced minimal changes in their marital relationship. I categorized these couples as having minimal change because the major descriptor they gave of change was increased satisfaction. None of the six couples categorized as having minimal relationship change identified a specific event or time in

which they made a decision to improve their marital relationship. Rather than describe specific changes in the methods or motivations with which they related to one another, they described changes in the consistency or depth of positive interactions. Four of these couples had more time available to spend together due to life transitions. The couples described experiencing intimacy at deeper levels of emotional bonding and finding more enjoyment in experiencing multiple dimensions of couple closeness with fewer distractions and more time to focus on relating to one another. Two of the couples had only been married long enough to adjust to married life and develop united family systems. All of the minimal change couples gradually experienced closer friendship and deeper couple identity about which they expressed their delight. For example, one wife among this group related, "We were reignited." This observation would seem to indicate that primary relationships align so closely with internal human existence as image bearers that minimal improvements often create more than minimal differences in the experience of human joy.

A second categorization applies to three of the couples interviewed who already perceived their marital relationships through a lens of self-giving love but lacked the skills to function effectively as a team in daily life as they desired. Each of these three couples recognized specific issues in their marital relationships that they deemed unsatisfactory and made specific choices to resolve the issues. One of these couples discovered, when their youngest child left home, that they had differing views of mutual submission and the wife did not feel safe individuating herself fully from the family. Through a concerted effort to communicate and develop mature solidarity, their relationship progressively reached levels of unity and intimacy they had never known

before. The second couple also struggled with individuation. Through a process of learning self-acceptance, they learned to value themselves and gradually gained more trust and respect for each other resulting in a maturation of their relationship. The third couple consistently hit a barrier to deep emotional intimacy and empathic reciprocity. A counselor helped them gain the mutual trust needed to overcome that barrier by developing the skill to communicate unspoken expectations. After developing enhanced skills, all three couples rapidly gained deeper trust, respect, and common life goals. Representative of the attitudes expressed by these three couples, one of the wives stated, "I hear other women talk and I am very thankful for the marriage I have, what I get to go home to every day." The lack of wisdom to function effectively created enough discontent for these couples to seek change actively. The changes these couples experienced significantly affected couple satisfaction.

A third category of couples applies to the couples that had all encompassing changes in their marital relationship dynamics. The eleven couples in this category experienced relationship changes through which they redefined their relationships. Lack of volitional commitment to an adequate definition of marriage caused havoc and emotional damage that threatened the continued existence of these marriages. Some of the couples separated and reconciled or divorced and remarried. Several overcame the effects of being childhood abuse victims. Many rebounded from adulterous affairs. All eleven couples reached a point of crisis at which they made decisions to improve their marital relationships. All of them discussed their marital dynamics at such length, after making changes in their relationship, that they developed personalized vocabularies to describe the changes. Some of their vocabularies initially came from counselors or other

resources. They talked about *fear dances* and *cycles of chaos*. Others used phrases with special personal meanings. For example, one of the couples that experienced a love challenge used the term *dethroned me* to describe the change from self-focused orientation to self-giving orientation. Many of the couples developed such deep trust and relational skill that they would joke and tease each other, together laughing aloud, about traumatic experiences that had become, through acts of forgiveness, part of the shared history binding them together. The factor most essential to marital satisfaction and longevity of the marriage, the factor upon which I found the most meaningful categorization of couples, consists of a volitional commitment to permanence within a relationship of other-oriented unity and self-giving love. In other words, the most important factor I found consisted of the way people defined marriage.

Many couples specifically expressed gratitude that they had found a church environment that lifted up people who sought help as heroes instead of demeaning them with shame. Twelve of the fourteen couples that made decisions to improve their marital relationships stated that changing to a church that encouraged counseling or encountering a Christian ministry that offered counsel helped precipitate their decision to seek help. Only one of the eleven couples that redefined their marriages did so without using a resource specifically designed for marital enhancement. That couple was one of the three couples that attributed much of their motivation for change to the influence of Tres Dias retreats. Couples often expressed the opinion that churches and ministries made a significant difference by encouraging couples to seek help.

Couples were aware of the marital enhancement resources promoted by the church. Cited more often than any other significant factor that helped them make

changes, eight couples found aid through the teaching contained in *Love and Respect: The Love She Most Desires; The Respect He Desperately Needs* by Emerson Eggerichs. Seven couples effectively sought help from Christian counselors. However, three couples mentioned seeking help from counselors that did not use a Christian basis. Surprising to me, only one of those counselors effectively helped the couple realize positive marital changes. That one counselor was a trauma specialist. *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate* by Gary Chapman played a role for six couples, though this book apparently did not make as great an impact as the book by Eggerichs. Two couples said the financial teaching of Dave Ramsey made a significant impact. At least two couples received significant help from ministries for victims of sexual abuse. Also informative, none of the six couples categorized as experiencing minimal marital changes cited a marital enhancement resource that made a significant impact on their relationship while three of the four couples that reconciled after separation or divorce did so with the aid of a loving challenge such as *The Love Dare* (Kendrick and Kendrick) or a tough love scenario (Dobson 43-51). Marital enhancement resources played a vital role in the lives of couples.

Most of the couples interviewed related some sort of disappointment that they entered their marriage unprepared to create a truly successful home. Even several couples categorized with minimal change commented about the many things they had to learn early in their marriages and how much benefit they thought couples could receive by learning about them before marriage. None of the couples were prompted to describe ways the church should change their approaches to marriage, yet many couples suggested that churches should make premarital preparations a higher priority. The consistency with

which couples mentioned their concerns for premarital preparation suggests a deeply and widely held need exists in the church. This observation presents a significant opportunity for churches to use premarital preparations strategically as a strong challenge to transformational discipleship.

Research Question #2

What spiritual growth was reported by the participating couples as having occurred after positive marital change?

The degree of spiritual growth reported by interview participants related consistently to the degree of positive marital change they experienced. None of the couples categorized as experiencing minimal marital change reported dramatic spiritual growth. They reported little or gradual maturation. Each of the three couples who experienced specific resolutions to their marital issues without redefining their marriage identity described revitalized relationships with God that generally included more relational intimacy with God. At least one spouse, usually both, from nearly all the couples that redefined their marriages also redefined their relationship with God.

Not only did the intensity of change parallel each other, the vocabulary couples used to describe marital relationship change sounded very similar to the vocabulary used to describe their spiritual growth. One wife states, "I used to make decisions without him (her husband). Now, we consult each other first when we see a situation coming." About relating to God, she said, "Before, when I needed to talk to someone, I sought out girl friends. Now, I go to God first." A husband described marital changes, "We have grown quite a bit on an emotional level. We are able to connect at a heart level." About relating to God, he said, "I had a great intellectual faith before.... Now, my heart and mind work

together.... I am able to connect with God at the heart level.” Another wife declared her risk of marital fellowship: “I had to choose to trust him [her husband] with the secret, deepest part of me.” About God, she exclaimed, “I came to understand God wants to be my best friend.... I can share sad and happy with him.... He’s a God of love. I now look at him as a father figure who wraps his arms around us.” The examples of parallel vocabulary were numerous, far more than can be recited in this report. The phenomenon occurred in the vast majority of the interviews.

The decision by a couple to make marital changes often was accompanied by a decision for spiritual change. The two most poignant examples of this phenomenon narrated during the interviews consisted of stories containing a challenge to love. One couple consisted of husband and wife who both admit they were not sincere Christians before their marriage fell apart. She had an adulterous affair, left her husband, and filed for divorce. Her husband described the time of separation:

I decided I needed God and needed to either follow him or not follow him. I chose to follow God whether the marriage made it or not. I decided I was going to do what I could from my end [to honor our marriage].

Guilt ridden, full of shame, and unable to sleep, the wife began to pray. She prayed all night and decided that, if her husband would accept her, she wanted to go back to him.

When she contacted her husband, he challenged her:

We had to make this work by leaving the past in the past, decide to move forward by working on this together, and live our lives the way God wants us to with Christ as the epicenter of our relationship.

As she shared enthusiastically, “We have done that and it is amazing to see.”

The wife of another couple, when her husband shut her out of his life, read *The Shack* (Young) and came to an authentic relationship with God. She then chose to take

The Love Dare (Kendrick and Kendrick) in order to learn how to love her husband no matter how he treated her. Her husband related his side of their story:

I hated it because she hadn't treated me that way before. It didn't seem real, but it lasted consistently for eight months.... I treated her like garbage, but she had peace.... It was her complete surrender to God.... She got to me and that is what drew us back together.

Both partners in the marriage chose to enter into a salvation experience with Christ in the midst of their struggle to regain commitment to their marriage. These two stories about love challenges dramatically demonstrate a consistently observed phenomenon.

Among the six couples that I categorized as having minimal marital change, none described any significant decisions to change their marital relationship and none of them described making significant spiritual decisions. Two of the three couples designated as moderate marital change couples made both marital and spiritual decisions in similar contexts. For example, one of the couples changed churches and sought marital counseling at almost the same time. That same couple described their decision to become "sold out to God" during the process of which they chose to "do life together." The narrative of the third moderate change couples did not clearly describe spiritual decisions in such a way that I could make a clear comparison. In five of the major change couples, both spouses made very significant spiritual and marital change decisions. In two more couples, one of the spouses made significant spiritual and marital change decisions. Another couple made both spiritual and marital decisions, though not as drastic. The narrative of one of the major change couples was not detailed enough to compare and two couples made spiritual change decisions, but the decisions were not nearly as significantly major as their marital change decisions. From small decisions such as reading the Bible or praying together up to large, high-risk choices such as the two

examples of challenging love, marital and spiritual decisions concurrently intertwined many times in the interview narratives.

Research Question #3

What growth in moral affective capacity was reported by the participating couples as having occurred after positive marital changes?

A complex relationship appears to exist between the developments of caring capacity in different levels of relational influence. While designing this project, I intended to use moral affective capacity as an indicator to evaluate potential and actual outreach ministry. I reasoned that personal, internal dissonance processed within the intimate relationship of marriage enabled caring capacity in more distant relationships. The interviews revealed a much more complex scenario with spheres of MAC development building outwardly according to spheres of relational influence as Figure 4.1 relates. MAC development happens through processing that occurs in primary relationships. The development of relational skills in more primary relationships allows for further development of the same or similar skills in less primary relationships. The opposite flow of relational skill development was less commonly described by couples, though a few examples were given in which relational skills gained through the workplace seemed to influence relational interaction in more primary relationships. For the couples interviewed, marital processing relationships hold the greatest significance. They realize even their parental effectiveness depends greatly upon marital health. Caring capacity development occurs mostly through working out primary relationships. Those capacities gain validation and refinement through other relationships. MAC development

flows mostly from primary to less primary relationships but not in a simple and direct format.

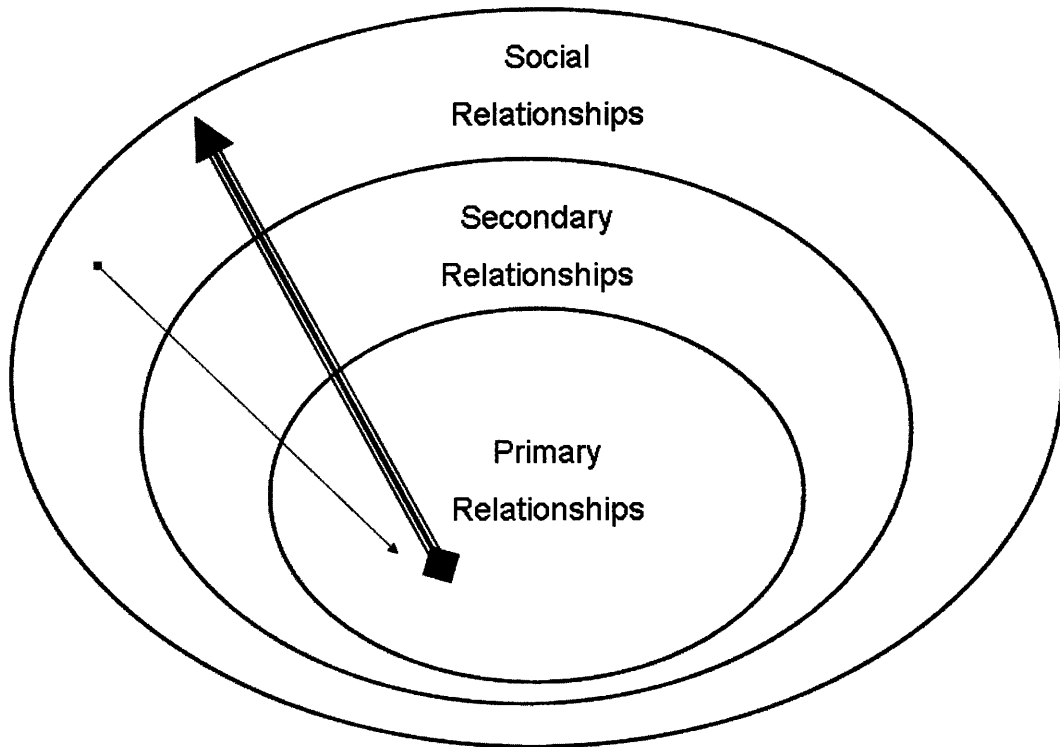


Figure 4.1. Flow of influence on MAC development.

The tales of discord that couples experience during their attempts to learn better ways of caring often became the fodder for humor as the couples described the difficulties of and developing new ways of interaction. As I read and reread the stories, a weakness in the interview format became apparent. None of the questions directly asked couples to identify or describe the processes by which they removed vices in order to replace them with virtues. The project may have been enhanced with questions that uncovered more narrative regarding the replacement of vices.

Almost by definition, positive change in marital dynamics and MAC development are synonymous. For marital improvement to occur, damaged relationships had to be repaired, disconnection had to be reattached, social exchange had to convert to mutual giving and receiving, and self-orientation had to be replaced with mindfulness. Marital discord is the dissonance that triggers the processing of new mental and emotional approaches within the primary intimate relationship of marriage. That intimate processing, which at times appears more like discord than intimacy, results in new or more effective caring behaviors, moral virtues. Describing MAC development is not significantly different from describing changes in marital dynamics. All of the couples interviewed developed moral virtues and refined caring capacity or put more time and priority into expressing them with one another. Development of caring capacity has the potential for use as a measure of marital dynamic maturity.

MAC development within other spheres of influence presents a more complex phenomenon. The primary relationship of parenting, secondary to marriage, demonstrates that complexity. Couples expressed a few instances in which attempts to care for children brought new revelations how to care for a spouse. More commonly, the healing of marriage or a better second marriage empowered reparation of damaged relationships with teen or adult children. Interviewees described that one or both parents demonstrate moral virtues more effectively after marital improvement. Often the husband and wife express imbalanced care that confuses or spoils children during the time of marital chaos. For example, the husband may constantly express harsh anger or the mother may pamper a child and protect the child from all disciplinary measures. Along with marital improvement, the spouses earn trust and heal their marital rift. They are then capable of

learning from each other how to choose more appropriate and consistent expressions of care or to depend on each other to create more balance in the care the children receive. Expressions of care by parents toward their children function both through their combined efforts as a parenting team and through the individual capacities of each spouse. The mother might have difficulty taking disciplinary measures but start coordinating with the father to perform more harsh forms of discipline, such as corporal punishment, after he gets home from work. Unhealthy parental relational systems inhibited parental team efforts and created an atmosphere of competition among the parents to express their individual parenting styles. Unhealthy relational systems compound the difficulty for parental expressions of care.

The association between marital relationship improvement and exhibition of care in social relationships appears to entail a web of influence among many complex factors. MACs developed in the marital relationship often appear in relationships external to the immediate family. For example, a husband who becomes mindful toward his wife often seems to develop more tolerance and empathy in the workplace and with other acquaintances. The phenomenon was not entirely consistent, however. A wife who had to overcome childhood issues with her family of origin in order to respect her husband and trust his commitment to her found that, once she trusted her husband, an environment of stability resulted. With such stability at home, she was less likely to perceive the motives of people at work and in social acquaintances in a positive light. She demonstrated fewer expressions of care toward them and concentrated more on expressions of care in her primary family. In other examples, many couples proclaimed a desire to share with other couples the insights that had improved their marriages. Several couples had developed

such ministries, but most had not. No pattern was observed in which the change in degree of care exhibited in the marital relationship related to the change in degree of care exhibited in less primary relationships. Developing the ability to take care of people with whom a person has intimate relations may form a foundation upon which potential exists to build the capacity to care for people outside of interdependent relationships. Developing the capacity to care for family, however, does not mean a person will develop the capacity to care for others outside the family. Other influences must exist.

Finally, almost all of the couples interviewed either joined a small group ministry or moved into leadership of a small group after developing or refining more virtues in their marital relationships. The means used to recruit couples for interviews through the church small group system probably skewed the ratio of couples who did so. Even so, the consistency with which the change in relation to small group participation happened after change in marital dynamics represents a notable theme. Several couples observed that they could never have made these changes without knowing they had an authentically safe, peaceful, and caring marital relationship. The stability of the marriage sways great power over the ability of couples to develop other healthy and significant relationships such as small group interactions through the ministries of the church.

Research Question #4

How are spiritual growth and moral affective capacity affected by positive marital change?

Merging the content of the first three research questions presents an interesting picture of the interplay between marital relationship dynamics and spirituality. Looking from several different vantage points gives the picture a variety of meanings. A close-up,

intimate look demonstrates rich textures of the personal transformation process. Taking a step back to view the role of resources, advisors, and teachers reveals a complexity very informative to discipleship. A more distant perspective yields a web of interactions that promote more understanding of the powerful potential and difficult processes of passing faith to other people. The following paragraphs attempt to consider these three perspectives.

Personal transformation does not happen in a vacuum of isolation. It occurs as a person processes dissonance within their primary relationships. For a married Christian, the two most primary relationships, spouse and God, usually extend the greatest influence. Couples consistently related stories that intertwined relationships with God and with spouse. The husband with anger issues married to a wife who did not understand healthy emotional boundaries and the couple who unexpectedly experienced disconnect from each other when their youngest child left home all recognized their need of God's help. Many interviewees sought to deepen the intimacy of their relationship with God in order to find courage and emotional resources with which to face their marital crisis.

In many other cases, one or both spouses discovered, or rediscovered, the caring capacity of God as their marriage improved. They described their assurance of God's acceptance, love, and nearness along with a new strength to act in a similar way toward their spouses. They began journeys *in Christ* to change the image of God they bear. As they found hope through faith, they changed their behaviors toward their spouses. A positive response from their spouses resulted in more gratitude and trust in God. A negative response provoked an occasion of spiritually wrestling to trust God. The narratives of other couples focused less on seeking God and more on the effects of

marital change. For them, experiencing a spouse that effectively showed empathy, respect, concern, and care resulted in trust and hope toward their spouses. The change in marital experience often either changed their perception of God or increased their faith in God's goodness. As God's image through their spouse became trustworthy, they also began to perceive God as trustworthy and good. Both the resolutions to change behavior and to strengthen faith promote further development of relational skills such as conflict resolution and communication.

Whether the first movement aimed toward God or spouse, the marital overture consisted of simultaneous quests to trust God, to trust spouse, and to develop healthy interdependence with both God and spouse. The quest and resultant perseverant positive behavior of one spouse eventually prompted a quest within the other spouse. The quest for greater intimacy with each other and with God became a partnership or team effort. Several couples consistently talked about early phases of transition from a first person perspective of "I did" and "you did," while later phases of change were described as "we decided to" or "we started to" about both marital and spiritual pursuits. For these Christian couples, the caring capacities developed in the marital relationship often reflected similar changes in relationship with God. The observation insinuates a process in which receiving and giving care among spouses runs simultaneously parallel to development of similar receiving care and giving praise and submission to God. Development of caring capacity within marriage appears to have powerful potential to enhance spiritual transformation in Christ.

Other factors also influence the probability whether marital enhancement results in spiritual transformation. Without appropriate knowledge, advice, and counsel, a

dissonant moment of marital dissatisfaction can result in further discouragement and isolation. Several of the couples interviewed separated and even divorced. Several people described ineffectively seeking help from counselors. Such failed attempts worsened the tensions between spouses. In a few instances, immoral behavior from counselors served to isolate a spouse further and lengthen the process of reparation that eventually occurred. Dissonance caused by marital dissatisfaction leads toward positive change and spiritual growth only when attached to wisdom.

Comparison of two of the books that couples used as aids to marital improvement demonstrates this concept. Several couples found *The Five Love Languages* by Chapman helpful. They learned specific and customized ways to communicate care according to each other's personalities. Even more couples found *Love and Respect* by Eggerichs helpful. Both books helped couples learn to communicate care, but I observed a significant difference. *The Five Love Languages* did not help any of the couples in early phases of repairing dissonant, conflicted relationships while several couples described *Love and Respect* as the tool that enabled them to launch marital change. Comparing the teaching of the two books, *Love and Respect* contains several dimensions not found in *The Five Love Languages*. *Love and Respect* ties dissonance to sexuality and to identity. It forcefully proposes dependence upon God for help in showing love and respect to a spouse whether or not the spouse ever makes a positive response and whether or not the marriage ever changes. Eggerichs encourages couples to redefine marriage in terms of self-giving love, mutual deference, and joyful intimacy. He promotes commitment as well as behavior. He declares that commitment to God demands commitment to spouse. The comparison of teaching in these two books suggests that more effective resources

promote skillful differentiation by couples in a way that upholds their identities of separate and different but equal bearers of God's image.

As I reviewed the interviews, I found that all the couples who made large marital changes received some form of instruction or advice regarding personal worth that encouraged them to value one another no matter how difficult and to protect their own personal worth by using low-risk opportunities to test the authenticity, commitment, and compassion of their spouses. Healthy reparation only occurs when spouses uphold their personal sexual identity in the image of God as they honor each other as equals, protect themselves enough to differentiate from each other as distinctly different individuals, and develop skills such as conflict resolution and communication within an environment of permanence. If any of these aspects are missing, the couple must receive instruction or guidance to correct the deficiency. Only within a framework of skillful wisdom can adequate attempts to develop moral virtues expect to succeed.

Relational systems contain several keys for empowering couples to pass their faith and caring capacities on to others. Parents who simultaneously developed mature boundaries of differentiation, trusting love, intimacy, and mindfulness believed they functioned as role models more adequately able to help their children develop caring capacity. Those couples described many reasons for their beliefs. They interacted more independently with other social friends and acquaintances using more highly functional relational skills. They returned to their interdependent relations to filter and process external influences within the combined wisdom of the family. Family members learned how to work cooperatively toward team goals such as budgeting.

The relational skills developed within the family inconsistently influenced relationships in broader social circles. Healthy changes in marital dynamics and family structure sometimes created dissonance with extended family and other social relations. Couples learned to support one another in public as they developed an awareness of each other's desire for social respect, and some learned to create new social boundaries to protect themselves and their families from unhealthy social relationships. Couples often expressed that the caring skills and capacities they learned within their marital relationships helped them develop greater awareness to discern social relationship dynamics. They did not, however, find that those skills enabled them consistently to function effectively within environments that did not contain commitment and interdependent expectations.

This project did not discern any factors that helped predict which couples would be empowered to build the capacity to take care of people in ministry situations and which couples would not be empowered to do so. The project does indicate that ministry and leadership levels of capacity to care can more readily be developed after both spouses in a husband and wife team learn to care for each other with joy and enthusiasm. These results appear to corroborate with social science theories. Erikson suggests that generativity, which includes healthy parenting, follows an intimacy that can only be established by persons that have differentiated with a positive identity (Dunkel and Sefcek 17). Relational spirituality theory suggests that expressing caring ministry includes a complex interaction of the ability to identify a moral need, the emotional capacity to respond to that need, and the procedural skills to respond effectively (Leffel, Fritz and Stephens 208). Together, the many examples listed demonstrate that relational

system dynamics contribute strong influence upon capacity to care and express faith within social relationships.

Summary of Major Findings

The answers to the four research questions of this exploratory study suggest four findings of potential major significance.

1. Moral affective capacity development could be used to describe or measure types and degrees of positive marital change.

2. Promoting positive marital change benefits greatly from helping resources that address marital issues from a holistic approach, including commitment to permanent self-giving, identity in Christ, mindfulness, and mutual respect.

3. Positive changes in the marital relationship enhance transformational spiritual growth.

4. Positive change in marital dynamics is only one of several factors that influence the expression of care beyond primary relationships.

The following chapter explores the potential implications, recommendations, and limitations associated with these findings.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Major Findings

This research project sought to uncover how positive changes in marital relationships influence growth in spirituality. The discussion of major findings that follows reveals that significant and complex relationships exist. The project also uncovered that the dynamics of relational spirituality growth, as proposed by Christian psychologists, have potential for use in the development of discipleship evaluation measures. It suggests that several resources available to the church have potential for positive effect on discipleship and the family life of constituents.

Developing Caring Capacity in Marriage

People are social by nature, but not every type of social interaction brings satisfaction. Human nature ultimately finds joy, contentment, and fulfillment through *caring* relationships. As previously observed, intimacy is one of the deepest longings within human existence. The expectations, within American culture, for dating relationships and marriages to express invigorating romance reveal the power of combining sexuality with care. People date and marry in the hope of living happily ever after only to find their lives are not happy fairy tales. The couples interviewed achieved marital satisfaction as they developed the ability to care for one other. These observations affirm research that indicates long-term energized relationships only occur when both persons involved intently give care to one another and graciously receive care from each other.

The close association of positive marital dynamics and moral virtue development, the expression of care, advocates a profound aspect of life; to bear God's image well and to care for others well are nearly synonymous concepts. This phenomenon relating the mutual giving of care that results in *we-ness* (Clulow 292) and intimacy directly reflects the discussion within the literature review that related marital relationship research to the image of God. Theologically, marriage relates to the very nature and identity of human creation in God's image. The observations of this project confirm the close relationship between human identity in the image of God and marital satisfaction.

A closer look at the parallels between Trinitarian theology and marital research findings reveals another significant similarity. The moral motives displayed in Figure 2.1 (p. 70) relate directly to both Trinitarian images of God and marital satisfaction. Reparation and reciprocity parallel *mutual deference* and *mutual submission*. Attachment closely resembles *joyful intimacy* and altruism relates to *unity*. Moral affective capacity development within a marital relationship typifies positive marital change. This relationship between the *imago Dei* and development of moral affective capacities denotes growth in spiritual maturity. From the perspective of a Christian leader, tools that measure moral affective capacity development could generate valuable information regarding maturational changes of the people. Such tools would indicate whether program participation helps participants experience transformational growth toward the image of God in their primary relationships.

Benefits of Holistic Marital Intervention

The drive to find satisfaction through a marital relationship effectively motivates most people, but the adventure of romance is not an easy trip. The level of marital

satisfaction obtained in the marriage depends upon the skill and motivation with which people express their drive for intimacy and sexuality. The discussion in the literature review gives ample evidence of the complex marital relationship dynamics couples must navigate. Through stages of bonding, testing, and commitment, couples build layers of trust and team functioning. If either spouse neglects the relationship or fails to develop adequate abilities to care, the solidarity, safety, and joint efforts of the relationship become suspect (Bodenmann, Pihet, and Kayser 490; Knobloch, et al. 174; Stanley, Markman, and Whitton 670). Any malfunction immediately causes damage to other aspects of the relationship and repair must occur to rediscover joy (Gordon, et al. 5). Every couple experiences failures and threats to their relationship that require steadfast dedication and effort to overcome. Such dedication flows from committed hearts (Stanley, Markman, and Whitton 672-73). Lack of commitment, ability to care, or skill to repair the relationship causes the couple to function improperly. Most couples, even if they began their marriage with a strong foundation, need help with many aspects of their relationship by the time they seek help. The results of this project indicate that the type of helping resources couples use make a difference in the quality of change they are likely to achieve. The more that helping resources address a wide variety of essential marital relationship dynamics, the more likely those resources will have a positive and effective long-term impact. In addition to relationship dynamics, spirituality is also significant. If the observations in this study prove to be accurate, that significant influences interact between marital dynamics and spirituality, the effectiveness of marital enhancement resources greatly increases within a transformational framework *in Christ*.

Marital Enhancement and Spirituality

Often described as the first and second Great Commandments, the words of Jesus create a strong case for the idea that loving God and loving people relate closely to one another (Mat. 22:37-9). I have often thought that when a person loves God, that person cannot help but develop care for others because God loves other people. I thought this phenomenon was based upon identifying with the heart of God. This project reveals a deeper and more theologically significant reason that people who love God develop love for other people. A profound relationship exists between the two commandments; the pattern found in couple interviews showed that the different aspects of loving respect for God and loving respect for spouse often occurred in parallel. The observed pattern relating parallel changes in marriage and spirituality confirms the holistic unity of the individual. Identity at the root of human existence controls relationships and behaviors. Transformation of core identity in Christ changes relationships and behaviors. No sacred or secular exists. If a person has been changed, a person is changed. A transformational change of identity in Christ changes the way a person relates to other persons. Whether that relationship extends up to God or out to a spouse is not the relevant issue. The person has changed and the person relates to others, all others, differently. This parallelism confirms the conjectures of the theological reflections that Christian marriage forms a foundational relationship for personal and spiritual transformation.

Multiple Factors Influence Extension of Care

When a person transforms *in Christ*, the motivations and desires that determine the way they relate start to change immediately. The changes in motive, however, do not immediately increase their skillfulness. As related in Figure 4.1 (p. 112), the ability to

care usually develops first in primary relationships and more slowly in less interdependent relationships. The phenomenon expresses substantial aspects of the complexity of caring.

In a world full of sin, transformation of primary relationships includes how the person relates to self. The person used to relate to others selfishly. The person related to self inappropriately, also. The person acted to gain what self desired whether or not it was good for self or helped self mature. The transforming person begins recognizing self as an image bearer, a person of inestimable value worthy of cultivation, respect, and love. Transformation in Christ initiates a change in self-identity that affects all other relationships.

As self-identity changes, the resultant changes of attitude immediately begin to change primary relationships. Primary relationships carry great influence because of their degree of consequence and the constancy of their effect. As anticipated, the wisdom to relate well changes rapidly as the crucible of the marital relationship constantly and consistently demands changes in behavior from the newly motivated spouse. As depicted in the literature review, changes in behavior allow the spouses to gain trust and as a result to develop congruent views of life and create a safe home environment from which to proceed out into the rest of the world with an attitude of care.

Marital relationships challenge spouses to work on relational skills, but primary relationships require less skill than more distant relationships. In order to demonstrate effective care through distant relationships people must overcome barriers from lack of personal knowledge or intimacy, lack of trust, lack of opportunity to care, and lack of relevance. The wisdom aspect of such relationships plays a great role. Distant

relationships with people upon whom one has little influence and with whom the person does not act interdependently are relationships that a spouse often recognizes has potential to bring harm or hurt to the family. This awareness leads the person to learn discernment in relating to others outside of primary relationships.

In addition, as predicted, the couples described many other factors that created a hesitancy to care effectively for people outside the immediate family. External caring efforts require time and other resources that are in limited supply. Some couples were influenced by the missional identity of a small group and a small group leader, but most couples seemed void of personal leadership models and relied heavily upon the formal, short-term outreach platforms of the larger church organization to find opportunities for expressing care outside of their family units. The embodiment of the cross by couple-saints usually requires a level of wisdom and community identity with other similarly minded couples that is difficult to achieve.

The efforts of God demonstrate many of the factors that are required for people *to care for* other people that do not attempt to return any caring concerns. *To care for* the mass of humanity that does not return his love, God has displayed incredible sacrifice and tenacity. Jesus had to incarnate as a human baby miraculously born to a virgin in order to overcome the barriers to distant relationships. Through incarnation, God the Son lessened the distance of his relationships in order effectively to demonstrate God's care for humanity. Then, throughout his public ministry, Jesus refused to allow people whom he could not trust to harm him or to harm those who depended upon him. When instructed by Father God, in the anointing of the Holy Spirit, Jesus allowed his own arrest and consequent crucifixion. If God displayed such effort to develop relationships with people

that were not interested in relationships with him and to care effectively for people who had no interest in returning his love, Christians must recognize missional ministry requires more than good intentions. In order for outreach ministries to increase effectiveness, church leadership must prepare God's image bearers to put forth diligent and sacrificial effort in order to care for distant others. As previously indicated from the writings of Hays, creation of a truly missional community of believers requires ongoing stretching of the community dialogue, in faith and prayer, toward the hope of touching others with God's love. Stretching of the community dialogue depends upon the interactions of strong couple-saint family units (469-70). The ability to care for distant others requires not only strong marriages but also a community of believers indwelt with wisdom, skill, anointing, discernment, hard work, and sacrifice.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this project addressed a significant gap in research by demonstrating the existence of a relationship between positive change in marital relationship and transformational spiritual change. The findings warrant the efforts and funds needed to investigate this relationship further. The format and limited resources of this project did not allow for the creation of a discipleship evaluation tool for local congregations. It, however, yielded a starting point for a model of maturity upon which to base such a tool. Measures of the development of moral affective capacity appear to be a functional approach to evaluating both relational maturity and spiritual maturity. The validity of this proposal needs further investigation. With refinement and further theological verification, the MAC perspective could be used to form a simple narrative discipleship tool that would allow for evaluation of programmatic effectiveness, help

create congregational community dynamics, and promote authentic follow-up to ministry efforts.

The findings of this project suggest that many factors beyond those capacities easily learned in daily relationships affect outreach ministries. The observation suggests that family systems specialists, sociologists, and others could collaborate with the propositions of relational spirituality in order to add informative layers to the moral virtues approach and possibly identify other relevant factors involved in the development of moral affective capacity in the complex environment of outreach ministries. Sociological works such as those edited by Guder already exist to challenge the current structures of organized Christianity. Perhaps a format such as moral affective capacity development has potential to function as a framework within which experts from many fields could uncover and describe pragmatic solutions for implementation. The complex nature of outreach to distant relationships demands that Christian experts in all fields use their abilities to find ways to lower the barriers to outreach ministries.

The simple concept that positive marital relationship change contains potential to enhance spiritual growth implicates an area of theological concern. It calls for further research investigating how different ministry contexts influence the impact of marital intervention upon spirituality. It also indicates a need to investigate *how* theology ties to marital enhancement efforts and *what* theological concepts should be associated in order to promote more and better interaction between spiritual and relational growth.

Limitations of the Study

West Ridge Church teaches several of the basic factors that apparently influence the interdependence of marital-spiritual growth such as marital permanence, intimacy

with God, and spiritual growth perceived as transformation in Christ. Until further research investigates the validity of this research project, the proposed findings remain suspect in all other intervention contexts. This project had no means by which to evaluate the influence of church teachings upon the findings. The findings of this project apply only to positive marital change. No reverse implications are valid. This project cannot express any valid opinion regarding the effect of neutral marital dynamics or negative marital relationship changes. Studies that include couples who have not experienced recognizable relationship changes or who experienced negative changes might uncover different perspectives through which to analyze the results found in this study.

The current proposals of relational spirituality express the need for removal of vices. This project did not adequately pursue that concept. New textures from studies regarding vice removal could further illuminate the interactions between marital dynamics and spirituality in some way that would change result interpretation, the conclusions, and recommendations of this project.

Unexpected Observations

I was surprised by the degree of enthusiasm related by the couples I interviewed. I was tempted to consider that observation one of the major findings of the project and would have done so if the observation directly related to the purpose of the research. With years of experience working with, teaching, and counseling couples with marital difficulties, I did not expect their exuberance to surprise me. My surprise only confirms and emphasizes to me the extremely fundamental nature of this issue. Anyone who thinks marital relationship dynamics are not among the most important factors impacting

Christian discipleship efforts should interview twenty Christian couples as I did, I predict that they, too, will catch an infectious enthusiasm.

Even as I read and contemplated the psychological proposals for relational spirituality and recognized how well they implicated the nature of Trinitarian theology, I did not see how closely the concepts of relational spirituality also came to describing marital relationship dynamics. I expected MAC development to relate to generativity. The use of MAC to describe all types of human relationships helps make a connection between spiritual growth and marital enhancement that I would never have recognized before this project.

Finally, I was surprised by the percentage of couples who mentioned their disappointment with premarital programs and the lack thereof in some instances. The issue appears, if these couples are at all indicative of the general populous, to be a deeply felt need among American Christians. As the number of couples divorcing has increased, the disappointment in preparations for marriage expressed by those couples, their friends, and their families should increase dramatically. Almost all of the couples interviewed are parents. The concern expressed by these parents who found ways to enhance their marriages indicates that a high percentage of parents recognize premarital preparations could enhance their children's ability to build a strong foundation for marriage and develop skills to overcome the risks of divorce in today's society. The desire for better premarital instruction creates an environment for many strategic ministry opportunities within the church.

Recommendations

Apart from the development of a programmatic-level, discipleship evaluation tool, as previously suggested, two further ministry recommendations seem relevant. First, creating an environment in which married couples obtain adequate help could be one of the easiest and most effective means of discipleship available to today's church. Second, life skills training before marriage could offer a strategic means of passing vibrant faith to next generations. The implementation of these two recommendations has great potential.

As several couples related in their narratives, they did not seek help for their marriages until they found a church home that encouraged such efforts. Since marital enhancement promises an effective means of discipleship that yields long-term fruit, churches would do well to examine their emotional culture consistently regarding whether a couple feels safe to seek help. The essential nature of sexual identity and the vitality created through positive change commend such efforts. Maintaining or developing an environment in which couples feel safe to seek help for their marital relationship should be considered a high priority by all congregations.

Teaching life skills to children, youth, and young adults promises uncharted discipleship potential. The number of couples interviewed who expressed their regret that they did not know more about relationships before they got married, without any provocation, indicates a significant need. Several suggested their disappointment that most churches do not consider premarital counseling to be an important ministry.

Upon reflection, the strategic importance of their suggestions cannot remain overlooked. The concept, though, needs embellishment. Many churches have found life skill training effective for adults in such areas as financial budgeting, marriage

enrichment, grief, and addiction recovery. The need for and effectiveness of such ministries remains unquestioned. The relevance of such intervention ministries does not lessen the fact that many couples expressed that better premarital programs would have helped them immensely. Churches need to consider why such great emphasis remains on intervention without greater priority placed on preparation and prevention. Relationship skills training and relational spirituality instruction could enhance discipleship ministries for every age group within the church. I can think of no reason to wait until a couple becomes engaged to teach them relationship skills that could have helped them live more effectively throughout the years they were dating other people in anticipation of meeting potential spouses. Even children of pre-dating ages could benefit from learning how to choose friends and develop friendships. Such instruction would create a basis upon which to build interactive family groups as well as peer groups for children, youth, and young adults. Every generation within the church should receive the challenge to consider in what ways they function as role models in life skill areas. Conversations between generations, groups, and families could begin some of the narrative dynamics suggested by Hays in which each congregation attempts to join the meta-narrative of community, cross, and new creation. Life skill training could be complemented by instruction regarding identity in Christ as the basis upon which to make decisions and choose behaviors. Age-level appropriate, life skills training in every imaginable area including friendship relational dynamics, budgeting, career choices, work ethics, dating, parenting skills, and ministry outreach skills could give every generation in the church a role to play in passing vibrant faith to the next generations. If the felt need for more significant premarital programs indicated in this research project is accurate, pursuit of the untapped

potential contained in life skills ministries to younger generations represents a significant opportunity to the American church.

Postscript

The reading, data collection, and writing involved in the creation of this dissertation challenged me in diverse and unexpected ways: This project personally challenged my perceptions of church ministries. Though not directly relevant to the project purposes, the literature on marital and family relationships often pointed my thoughts toward the similarities between the individuated team in a marital relationship and the roles assigned to varying groups of people within congregations. Those contemplations increased my awareness of the need for local congregations to challenge each generation toward the Lordship of Christ both individually and as a community of peers to have a faith worth sharing, to share that faith with other generations, and to respect other generations. I also observed that several research projects in which answers perceived from a woman's perception radically changed the ways in which the results had been interpreted solely by men. That observation forced me to contemplate the injury incurred by gender prejudice, mostly against women, and demasculization within American congregations.

I began this project with a strong personal bias regarding the need for ministry to focus on transformational spirituality that influences the daily expression of Christianity and made a personal challenge to myself to evaluate that bias as objectively as I could possibly manage. As hard as I tried, I found no evidence to sway my beliefs in any other direction. This project served to increase my concern for the need to structure congregational ministry such that leadership consistently evaluates its influence upon the

daily lives of congregational participants and adapts the methods in order to ensure congregational ministries demand that members grow toward Christian maturity and empower people for ministry inside and outside the congregation. The project also enriched my understanding of the importance of family relationships and family systems to individual and congregational growth.

During the process of this project, I developed a pronounced respect for the usefulness of research literature and a concern for the relative isolation of theological research from other branches of research endeavors. The works of several Christian psychologists and the courageous discipleship research efforts of the Willow Creek Association served to highlight this concern. These concerns became so relevant in my mind that I began to investigate whether the potential exists for me to help create initiatives to investigate Christian discipleship that involve experts from a multiplicity of disciplines.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Begin interview by introducing myself and my background as both church planter and minister of pastoral care who has presented marriage seminars and performed pastoral counseling.

Give assurance of protection of privacy.

Briefly describe that this project is interested in the effects of changes in marital relationships on the lives of Christians.

Ask a few introductory questions such as where they grew up, how many children they have, what types of careers they have, and their favorite activities or hobbies.

Marital Changes Cluster

- 1) In responding to the request for couples to participate in this research project, you indicated your marriage has improved somehow in the last few years. What terms would you use to describe your marital relationship before those changes?
 - a) What was good about your marital relationship, or what were the highlights, at that time?
 - b) Were there problems with communication, emotions, arguing, commitment?
 - c) Were you disappointed in your marriage? If so, how?
- 2) Did you seek any help or attend a marriage seminar of some sort? If so, what did it consist of?
 - What drew you to seek help or attend the marriage seminar?

- 3) Describe the changes you think have occurred in your marital relationship since that time?
 - i) Do you think you or your spouse became more gentle, kind, patient, or anything like that? Describe?
 - ii) How did the intimacy of your relationship change?
 - Emotional, sexual, vulnerability, openness, arguing
- 4) Everyone has something about them that isn't perfect. How has your perception of your spouse's weaknesses changed?
 - a) Ways you discuss or describe weaknesses?
 - b) Ways you confront weaknesses?
- 5) Have the ways you show respect for each other changed?
 - speak encouragingly, ceased humiliation, brag to others
- 6) Have your motivations to help each other changed?
 - chores, achieving goals, dreams, or career interests
- 7) Has your willingness to make sacrifices for each other changed in any way?
- 8) What brought about the changes in your marriage and relationship?

Spiritual Growth Cluster

- 1) How would you describe your Christian life before the changes occurred in your marriage?
- 2) Have you noticed any changes in your Christian life since your marital relationship started to change?
 1. What has happened to your relationship with God?

2. intimacy, prayer, motivation for spiritual disciplines, experience presence of God, commitment, willingness to obey?
- 3) Do you think you have become a more mature Christian?
 - In what ways? Why?
- 4) As you look back to the time before your marital relationship improved, can you recognize any ways that your marriage was holding you back spiritually?
 - a) Was your ability to pray hindered?
 - b) Ability to talk to God or hear God's guidance?
 - c) Has that changed at all? If so, why?

Moral Affective Capacity Cluster

- 1) Have there been any changes in your attitudes toward people (other than your family)? Do you think you care more about people outside your family?
 - a) Describe any changes in your life that have occurred because of the changes in attitude or care.
 - b) Do you relate to people differently? Who?
- 2) Do you make a difference in someone's life or reach out to touch someone's life differently or more often than before?
 - Why do you think these things changed?
- 3) Has your church involvement changed? In what ways?
- 4) Have you participated in any outreaches of the church?
 - Is that participation different from before?

Further Probes Cluster

- 1) Has either of you developed a new or different ability to speak truth to people when it isn't comfortable?
- 2) Has your ability to confess your shortcomings or ask forgiveness changed? To listen to confessions or give forgiveness?
- 3) When a person experiences emotions, especially negative emotions, they make choices how to respond to those emotions. They can allow the emotions to control their actions and thoughts. They have another choice to use the emotions as information about both internal and external circumstance. That information can help them be sensitive to themselves and other people. Have you noticed any changes to how you use your emotions to influence the way you respond to each other or interact with each other since your marital relationship improved? Have you noticed any changes in how you use emotions when relating to other people?
- 4) Any other observations you would like to make about the way you express your Christian life to others has changed since your marriage changed?
- 5) Can you think of any other influences that have been important?
- 6) Do you think the changes in your marital relationship impacted how these other influences touched your life?

APPENDIX B

CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT

This confidentiality statement regards dissertation research interviews conducted by Ron Burton toward partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry for Asbury Theological Seminary. This notice explains both the purposes of the interview in which you are about to participate and the procedures which will be used to maintain the confidentiality of all the information you share during the interview.

In reviewing current research literature regarding the interactions of faith and marriage, I discovered many research projects over several decades that described various aspects of the influence of religion and spirituality upon marital relationships. To my surprise, even though many churches put forth a lot of effort in pre-marital teaching and marriage enhancement, I found practically no research that explored the impact that positive marital change makes upon spiritual growth or experience of Christian life. The information from your interview will be compared to several other interviews to discover commonalities and themes of such influences in order to give Christian ministries greater insight to the impact their marital enhancement efforts make upon Christian discipleship.

The information you fill out on the reverse side of this form will be used to code the information and narrative given during the interview. Information used for comparisons of the interviews will be distinguished by a code made from the numbers of your street address, mother's initials, gender and birthday. The original recordings of the interviews will be kept locked in a fire safe. The analytical data will be maintained on portable USB drives inaccessible through the Internet. Any references to narratives in the published research results will use fictitious names.

Husband's Name _____

Wife's Name _____

Initial of Wife's Mother's Maiden Name _____

Day [of the Month] which Husband was born _____

Day [of the Month] which Wife was born _____

Home street address _____

City, ZIP _____

Today's Date _____

Location of Interview _____

APPENDIX C

FLIER HANDED OUT AT SMALL GROUP PRESENTATIONS

**Invitation to Participate
in ministry dissertation project**

**Needed:
Christian couples
who agree their marriage has
significantly improved in the last several years**

I need to interview 20 to 30 such couples within the next month for the research project culminating my *Doctor of Ministry* studies with *Asbury Theological Seminary*. The project will fill a gap in theological research about the impact of marriage improvement upon spirituality. The potential exists for follow-up research designed to help local church efforts.

I realize everyone is very busy. I would like to offer a \$25 Macaroni Grill/Chili's/On the Border/Maggiono's gift card in thanks to participating couples.

Each couple may schedule the hour or so interview at a time and location convenient to them. All interviews will be strictly confidential.

If you would be willing to participate, please contact me as soon as possible.

If you have friends who fit the description, please tell them too.

Ron Burton

(770) 634-6152 cell

ron-burton@comcast.net

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